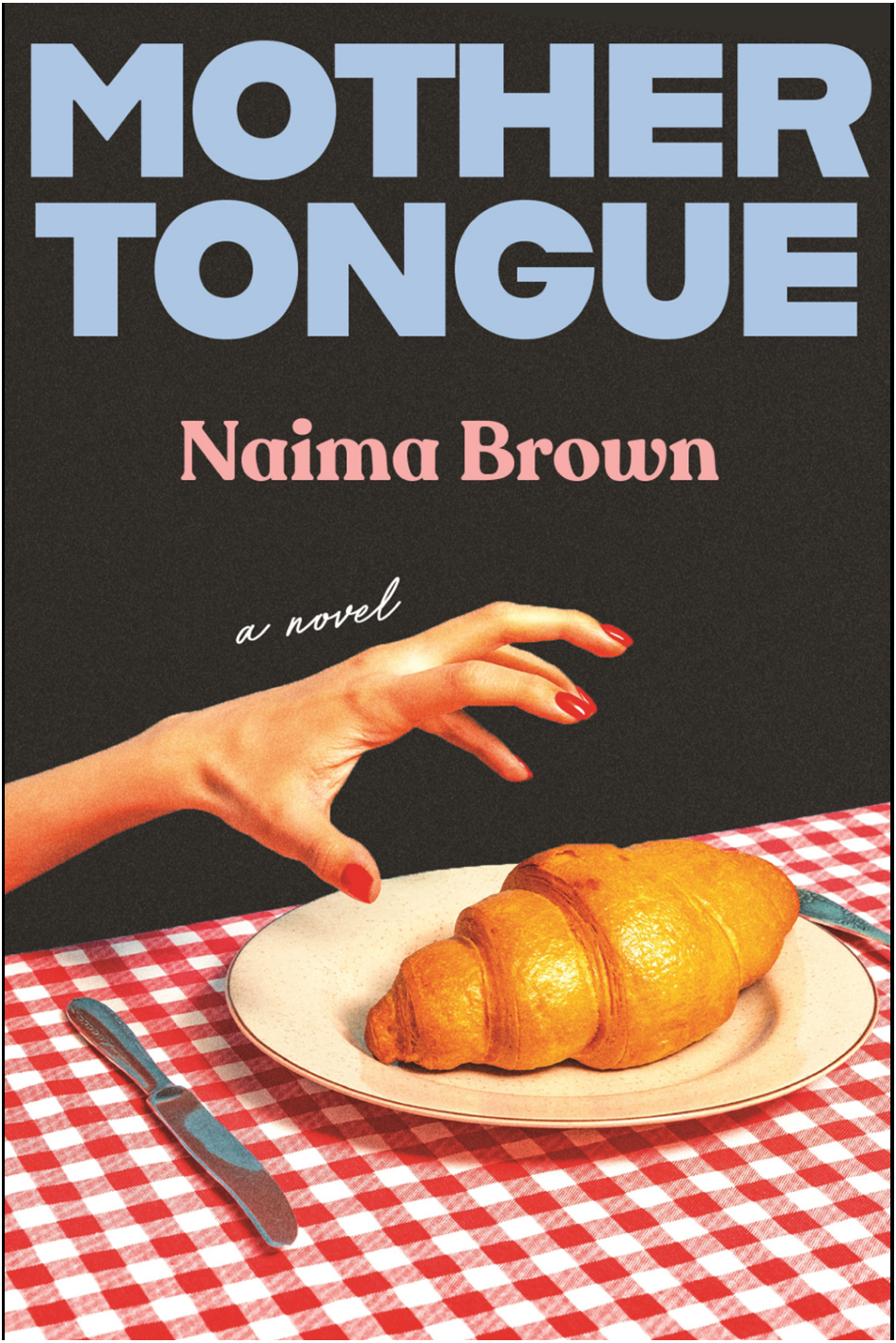
MOTHER TONGUE

Naima Brown

a novel



About *Mother Tongue*

What if being true to yourself means hurting everyone around you?

Brynn is a claustrophobic suburban mother on the brink . . .

Eric, her husband, is transforming in dark and dangerous ways . . .

Their daughter, Jenny, can't fathom the storm barrelling towards her . . .

When Brynn awakes from a coma speaking fluent French, she seizes the opportunity to start a new life in Paris, a seismic personal transformation that leaves a slew of shattered lives in its wake.

Darkly funny and profoundly insightful, *Mother Tongue* challenges our expectations of motherhood and our beliefs about women's lives. It is at once an exhilarating tale of escape and a warning about the cost of renewal.

Also by Naima Brown

The Shot
How to Age Against the Machine

MOTHER TONGUE

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a novel

MACMILLAN
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For every version of every one of us
that never gets to take a spin.

'I speak German to my horse, French to women, Italian to men and Spanish to God.'
~ Attributed to Charles V (1500–58),
Spanish Monarch, Holy Roman Emperor

'Speak American!'
~ Sarah Palin, former Vice Presidential Candidate

Prologue

How to Play the Universe Game

Brynn is inside of her body; slight, lithe, pale, recently showered, moisturized and generally well cared for.

Her body is inside of her most comfortable sweatpants and her husband Eric's time-softened Ohio State college sweatshirt. Her feet are bare, toenails painted tangerine. One of these feet strokes the flaxen coat of Ginger, the golden retriever, whom Brynn adores.

Her body sits atop the couch – bought new when Brynn and Eric first moved in together, now stained with spilled juice and smears of oatmeal, courtesy of their daughter, Jennifer.

The couch holds court at the center of the living room slash playroom slash laundry room, visible, though blurrily so, through the windows made steamy by the radiator set at a balmy seventy-one degrees.

The living room is inside their house, currently filled with the aroma of Brynn's favorite Yankee Candle – Buttercream – which she buys in bulk. Strangers know it's their house by the lacquered sign hammered into the hard pine above the front door: *The Mitchells.* The front door is between the large street-facing windows of 702 Matador Street, the classic green-brick Craftsman bungalow with the generous veranda, or so the real estate agent had described it.

The Mitchell home is in a subdivision inside a suburb inside of Elderpool – a small city with a population of 105,000 and an average

household size of 3.13 people. The latter is the sort of fact that Brynn's husband Eric considers interesting dinner conversation; Brynn does not agree. She is neither curious nor amused by the concept of .13 of a person.

Elderpool is in the state of Michigan. Strangers know it's Michigan when they look at a map because it has been stuffed into an oven mitt, surrounded by four of the five Great Lakes: Superior, Huron, Erie and, of course, Michigan. Lake Ontario seems to want nothing to do with the Wolverine State.

Michigan is in the Midwest of the United States of America. In case this is ever in question, Brynn's husband has planted a steel flagpole smack-dab in the middle of their front yard, upon which he proudly flies the Stars and Stripes. He keeps spare flags in the garage in the event the current one is stolen or defaced in some fashion. This hasn't happened in the six years they've lived in the house, but that doesn't mean it won't.

The United States of America is in the Northern Hemisphere of the planet Earth, one of eight planets in the solar system orbiting the sun.

The solar system is located in the Orion Arm of the Milky Way galaxy, which is a member of the Virgo Supercluster of galaxies, which exists in the ever-expanding universe. The universe is known to us in slivers of potential but heavily caveated facts and mostly still a mystery – but one thing is for sure: Brynn is not the universe's primary concern. This isn't something Brynn understands, yet.

Brynn would prefer not to let her mind wander so far away from her suburb. Which, to be exact, is the gated prefabricated neighborhood of Elderpool Terrace, each of whose two hundred and fifteen houses is laid out in a neat and orderly fashion. Brynn often ponders the name bestowed on her suburb, and concludes that *terrace* is a word that should mean something, but in this case it mocks her. When she thinks of terraces, she imagines the advertisements she's seen for trips to Indonesia or Thailand, steep green mountainsides sculpted into paddies, farmers in broad hats moving like mirages across the melting slopes; vertical lines of walking sticks, horizontal lines of low, simple fences . . . lines and shadows and deep, fertile pools of water – the kind of landscapes backpacking tourists write bad poetry about. She's never been anywhere, so what does she know? But

still, it rattles her that there are no actual *terraces* in Elderpool Terrace. Instead, pits and depressions have been filled with the lopped-off tops of modest hills, leaving behind only the gentlest of gradients, certainly nothing to write a poem about.

Why are they allowed to lie like this? Brynn wonders, annoyed. How can they just go ahead and call it a terrace? Isn't that false advertising? Is it even legal? She already feels as if she's somehow been tricked into accepting the parameters of her life; she doesn't need more plays-on-words and sleights-of-hand trying to convince her that she lives in paradise, when it is clear that she is merely in the suburbs.

The problem is not confined to Elderpool Terrace. The closest thing Elderpool *Lakes* has to bodies of water are the amoeba-shaped swimming pools that come with each plot.

There is Elderpool *Village* . . . well, Brynn isn't exactly sure what constitutes a village, legally speaking, but she is pretty sure it is supposed to have villagers, and Elderpool Village's grid of identical single-family homes is at ten percent capacity, tops – a result of its close proximity to the Elderpool dump, which, refreshingly, is as advertised.

Elderpool *Sanctuary* is bordered on two sides by the roaring interstate that honks and belches all night long, hardly the soundtrack one associates with a sanctuary.

All of this deceit unnerves Brynn to her core. She has the unshakable sense that if we can't even name a thing truthfully, anything that might grow from that thing will be malformed, defective. It strikes her as a foolish, dangerous thing to do – like building a shopping mall on ancient burial grounds or walking under a ladder, an unjustifiable temptation of fate – to call a thing something it isn't.

Part One

Chapter One

When Jennifer, her little face flushed red with blood and frosted with white, waxy vernix, was gently lowered into Brynn's arms, two weeks late and after a marathon twenty-nine-hour labor, Brynn's first words to her firstborn were, 'Well, hello there, little one.'

Eric, who had spent a large portion of Brynn's labor lamenting the fact that his daughter was being born on the same day that the smooth-talking huckster – who was most certainly not a *real* American – was elected President, had stammered, 'You sure took your time, baby girl,' before his face had crumpled into tears, which Brynn chose to believe were tears of joy, and not of anguish over the election.

While a nurse stitched her perineum, Brynn said, 'Buh-buh-buh-buh-buh,' while she counted Jennifer's fingers and toes, marveled at her nostrils.

After that, Brynn was careful to follow the advice of the entire tree's worth of books she'd read, making lots of animated facial expressions, smiling and laughing and trying to hold eye contact for as long as Jennifer would allow it. Many mornings were whiled away with Brynn covering her face with her hands and then bursting through them, 'Ahhh-boo!' and again 'Ahhh-boo!' and again 'Ahhh-boo! Ahhh-boo! Ahh-boo! Ahhh-boo!' until her face hurt.

Eventually, Jenny joined Brynn in the babblesong, and they would stare at each other, Jenny propped up on Brynn's thighs as she sat on the floor, leaning against the couch. 'Ooo*mah*, ooo*mah*,' followed by spit-bubble raspberries.

'Mamamamama,' Brynn continuously reintroduced herself, kissing Jenny's warm stomach on the changing table. 'Mamamamama,' Brynn reminded her while she breastfed, gazing at the perfect whorl of hair on the top of Jenny's perfect head. Eric had his own sounds. 'Dadadadada,' he'd say while hammocking his arms, dipping and

swaying like Brynn had taught him. And, 'Byebyebyebyebye,' as he walked out the door every morning.

This went on for months and months until, three days before Jenny's first birthday, when Jenny was sitting in her high chair, her face covered in mashed banana, Brynn was rewarded with a clear and ringing, 'Mama!', a name which attached itself to Brynn like a luminous, shapeshifting octopus wrapping its tentacles around her heart and suctioning tightly.

Three years and six days later, Brynn stepped on a red piece of Lego and screamed silently, her mouth a muted howl as she crumpled to the floor and examined the soft arch of her foot, pressing her thumb into the tiny laceration. '*Fuck*,' she whispered, careful not to wake Jenny. It was only 1:25 pm, and Brynn had fifteen more minutes before Jenny would wake up, like she always did, at 1:40 on the nose, and Brynn was entitled to her fifteen minutes.

She picked up the Lego, placed it into the bin with the rest of its fellow assassins, and sat down on the couch.

Two weeks prior, the same slippery *socialist* had won a second term, but Eric couldn't bring himself to remove his guy's sign, which Brynn could see poking out of the fresh snow. It was Wednesday in the last week of November; they'd just celebrated Jenny's fourth birthday party on Sunday (which had been a great success for Jenny, and a horror show for Brynn . . . *fucking Lisa*).

She picked up the yellow legal pad from the coffee table and looked at her to-do list (where she often wrote down tasks she'd already completed, just for the pleasure of crossing them off).

defrost chicken
Ginger's worming tablet
Jenny bday thank you cards
start X-mas lists
refill bird feeder
book Jenny checkup
return library books

Her eyelid twitched. She'd become used to it – the internet told her

it was fatigue, and there was nothing to be done about that. 1:30 pm. Ten more minutes until Jenny would wake up. Their routine was a clockwork of interlocking gears and delicate systems punctuating their stay-at-home days with snacks and naps and their preschool days with pick-ups and drop-offs, from which she was loath to deviate.

Brynn was an organizing principle, a sundial, a tuning fork.

A rule you could set your clock to.

She recalled the portions of her life – before Eric, before Jenny – when she'd swum through time at a slower, more generous pace. When she'd gathered time to her chest in larger bundles of days, weeks, months and years. Now, she was constantly sorting thin reeds of seconds, measuring out grains of minutes, of quarter- and half-hours, all to appease The Schedule. In all the books she'd read about parenting and motherhood, nobody had ever told her how relentless it was. That you had to do All. The. Things. Every. Fucking. Day. Her eyelid twitched once more.

Love wasn't the problem.

Love rarely is.

The problem was love-adjacent, though, wasn't it? Or rather, Brynn often thought, it was the inability to know how her love for Jenny stacked up against the love of other mothers. She was certain that other mothers were better at this than she was. As if someday a group of scientists would discover a way to measure the strength of her emotions, the depth of her feelings, and she'd be caught out, lacking. *You love your daughter thirty-six percent less than the average mother*, she imagined a judge admonishing her, banging his gavel, sentencing her to some sort of penance. Walking barefoot across a field of Lego, perhaps, or cutting the itchy tags out of a thousand shirts.

Her phone rang and Lisa's name popped up on the screen alongside a picture of the two of them, fifteen years old, dressed as sexy zombies for Halloween. Brynn had hairsprayed her mop of unruly auburn curls into a Bride of Frankenstein tower.

Brynn remembered the moment the photo had been taken like it was yesterday. They'd gone to a party at Stephanie Baker's house. Dry ice and chalky smoke billowed through the rooms, which glowed orange from jack-o-lantern fairy lights. Ducking under swathes of fake

spider webs and swatting away cardboard skeletons dangling from light fixtures, they'd wandered around, arm in arm, trying to look like they had any idea what to do with themselves, how to arrange their limbs and faces in a cool, easy way.

In the kitchen they had shots of glittering Goldschläger.

In the living room they'd taken gurgling bong hits.

In the dining room they'd inserted funnels into their mouths and filled their torsos with cheap, frothy beer.

Brynn's memories are a picture slide show of sweaty dancing; standing in line to pee; Doritos and salsa; two Zimas. Brynn made out with Jake, who was dressed like Freddy Kreuger. Where had Lisa gone? Brynn peeked into bedrooms (*occupied!*) and dark garages (*occupied!*), wandered outside to the firepit where a group of guys stood silently poking at the flames with sticks, and still couldn't find her.

And then she'd heard Lisa's voice, loud and hollow, distorted. Brynn followed it into the living room where she found her, standing alone on the coffee table, singing into a karaoke microphone, tunelessly belting Coldplay's 'Yellow', out of time with the words scrolling on the screen behind her. Brynn read the scene in an instant: Lisa's hunted eyes and boob-sweat, dried bean-dip crust in the corner of her mouth, the acne on the back of her arms red and angry, and the crowd: sneering, gawking, pointing. Lisa, Brynn knew, was terrified; a kamikaze fly who had launched herself straight into the spider's web. So what did Brynn do? She did what best friends should do. She leaped onto the table and looped her arm through Lisa's, leaned in close to the microphone and joined in, yanking them into the rhythm. Brynn gyrated and blew kisses to the crowd, drawing applause. Someone yelled *Show us your tits!* and she did. When the song was over she took Lisa's hand and held it high like they'd just won a gold medal. And then the flash of a camera.

She declined Lisa's call.

It had only been three days since Jenny's birthday party and she wasn't ready to talk to Lisa. What was there to say? She was sure Lisa wanted to apologize, and sure she'd do it in such a self-effacing way as to force Brynn to accept. Lisa's apologies were always desperate in this way, even when they were children. She had a way of extorting

pity, of making Brynn feel like any frustration or annoyance she might feel, no matter how justified, was taking a cruel toll on Lisa. But this time, Brynn couldn't – wouldn't – capitulate. How did Lisa expect them to move on from the things she'd said, or rather, the things she'd *sung*? It was the One Meanest Thing that Lisa could have done, the Uncrossable Line.

Eighteen years ago, two little girls riding their Huffy bikes, training wheels only recently removed, were arriving from opposite directions on the first day of third grade at Elderpool Elementary. They sat atop their banana seats like jockeys, streamers flowing from their handlebars, fluorescent plastic beads sliding noisily up and down their spokes, bright pink helmets obscuring the terror on their faces as they both realized they'd miscalculated their trajectories.

Without any time to scream, Brynn and Lisa slammed into each other. Brynn went over the top of her handlebars and ended up under her bike, while Lisa's foot was caught in the chain which had come off in the melee. Bewildered, they stared at each other open-mouthed.

'Lisa!' cried Lisa's mom, Terry, catching up to them with Lisa's twin brother, Porter, close behind. No parent was catching up with Brynn; Henry and Dana Plover were both busy at the store, the Elderpool Family Grocer, which greedily devoured all of their time and energy. Rising slowly, Brynn looked down and surveyed her legs, her arms. There was no blood, nothing requiring the aid of an adult. She looked at Lisa and saw that she was similarly unscathed. Something passed between the two of them then, a kind of pact, that this moment could still be salvaged if they could both manage to not cry, to not be babies. Lisa shook off her mom and straightened. 'I'm Lisa,' she said.

'I'm Brynn,' said Brynn. 'I was supposed to be a boy.'

Lisa didn't register the odd statement, which Brynn's parents had been trying to get her to stop announcing to strangers for years. Instead, Lisa took stock of what seemed like hundreds of jelly bracelets adorning Brynn's twiggy arms, and the gold studs in her ears that Lisa hadn't yet been allowed to get.

For her part, Brynn noted Lisa's purple Jansport backpack dripping with Troll Doll charms and Garbage Pail Kid patches, which she immediately coveted. Brynn could sense Lisa glancing hungrily at her tie-dye Skechers Roadies while she, in turn, admired Lisa's studded oversized t-shirt that she was certain she'd just seen on D.J. Tanner in last night's episode of *Full House*.

They were best friends by recess, inseparable by the end of the week, and by the end of the school year Brynn practically lived at Lisa's. The Collins family easily absorbed her. Brynn's own house was large and new, covered in white carpet and dotted with cabinets full of Very Fragile Things – but it was empty and quiet. No matter where you stood in the house you could always hear the big grandfather clock ticking in the foyer, as there were no softer sounds of life to capture and mute it. Her parents mostly communicated with her through the notes and cash her mother left under the Bahamas magnet on the fridge. *We'll be late, order pizza. Mom.*

Lisa's house was small and badly needed a new coat of paint. The front lawn was always in need of cutting. There was a special way you had to jiggle the front door to open it, but once inside, it was warm and full. Brynn was enthralled with Lisa's twin brother, Porter, who was always performing for them from his well-worn copy of *1,000 Jokes for Kids*: *'Why couldn't the pony sing the lullaby? She was a little horse!'* In addition to Porter, Lisa also had two cats, a dog, and a fifteen-year-old parrot named Blanche in a giant cage in the kitchen that constantly screeched the theme song to *The Golden Girls – Thank you for being a friend!* – until someone draped a blanket over her.

Lisa loved being at Brynn's house for its privacy, calm and the lack of supervision.

Brynn desperately preferred Lisa's – privacy was overrated, she'd determined, and supervision at the Collins' house mostly manifested in the form of cupcakes and spontaneous hugs.

The irony that it was Lisa who now lived alone – who had peace and quiet, who didn't have hands grasping at her from all directions, who could spend an afternoon in bed with a book and not feel guilty about it – wasn't lost on Brynn. She often told Lisa she was envious of her life. 'Want to trade?' she would ask Lisa whenever she visited her apartment. 'You can go back to my house and make dinner and do

bathtime and read a hundred books to put Jenny to sleep, if you like?' No thank you, Lisa would always say, I'll stay here with my wine and binge-watch *Girls*. But Brynn always saw the shadow that passed across her face, the brief but clear flicker of yearning. *And there it is*, Brynn would think. Looking back now on the last eighteen years of their lives, she wondered how she hadn't noticed it before. The very foundation of their friendship was built on envy, a fixation on the things they wanted from each other.

Brynn *was* supposed to be a boy. To this day, she is unwavering in her conviction that she heard her father, Henry Plover, utter these very words mere moments after she'd emerged into the world, his voice telegraphing disappointment and concern.

Of course, she'd been told countless times that this was an impossibility. How could she have understood anything? She had not yet acquired language, was pre-verbal, undifferentiated from a kitten or a sapling.

When Brynn confronted her mother she was met with defensiveness and a flurry of jazz hands: *You must understand, dear, Dr. McManus had told us you were a boy! He'd misread the scan! All of the clothes we'd bought you were blue! It was a massive adjustment!* No matter what her mom said, Brynn had never sloughed off the feeling that her parents regarded her like a package they'd never ordered, but were too busy running the store to send back.

Brynn was staring at the vacuum lines on the carpet, lost in her memories, when Jenny woke from her nap at 1:40 as expected and wandered out of her bedroom in a wrinkly blur of princess pink and ballerina tulle. Her hair was a sweaty tousle and her cheeks were flushed as she clambered, thumb in mouth, into a hot pile of fresh-out-of-the-dryer towels on Brynn's lap.

'Hi baby,' Brynn said, gently pulling Jenny's thumb out of her mouth, 'did you have a good nap?'

By 1:45 Jenny was drinking apple juice from a plastic cup. By 2 pm she had peed, wiped and flushed all on her own, earning herself a sticker which she promptly added to the collage on the back of the bathroom door. By 2:15 she'd picked out the book she wanted for story time – an alphabet book of anthropomorphized animals for every letter: *H is for Hyena who is wearing a Hat! L is for Lemur who is making Lemonade!*

Jenny sat on Brynn's lap, one hand clutching her ants-on-a-log, a length of celery filled with peanut butter and topped with raisins, the other hand idly, preciously, stroking Brynn's cheek.

Brynn loved this little habit. Jenny had done it ever since she was a baby, reaching her tiny hand up toward Brynn's face when she was breastfeeding, as if Brynn were a saint. Brynn had no memory of ever needing her mother like this, no imprint of her mother's textures and contours. Surely moments like these must have passed between them? Did her mother have a stash of private, tender memories just like the ones Brynn was willing herself to form right in this moment? This wasn't the kind of question she could ask Dana Plover; it would be like asking her mother to discuss her period or a dream she'd had – in other words: a weird thing to ask about and none of Brynn's business.

They'd come to Jenny's favorite page – *W is for Whale who is Whispering!* – where Jenny always placed her ear on the illustration of the whale's puckered mouth, trying to hear what it was saying. They'd created their own little ceremony around *W*, and Brynn knew this was the reason Jenny chose this book time and time again. Was it a test? Did Jenny sense the fragility of her mother's heart? Still, Brynn's mind had wandered around *V is for Viper*, entranced by the fat flakes falling outside the window, the American flag Eric had insisted on erecting on their front lawn flapping and jerking in the wind like an improvisational dancer, obeying some force and rhythm which she could not make out, and she'd missed her cue.

''Isper it, Mommy, 'isper it,' Jenny prompted again, her head bowed, the perfect coil of her little ear pressed against the page.

'*I love you*,' Brynn whispered into the crook of Jenny's warm little neck, and then covered her head in kisses while Jenny squirmed and giggled.

The television was on mute for story time, of which there was seventeen minutes more to go. Brynn was faintly resenting the fact that she rarely got to watch a full episode of *Dr. Phil*, this being a particularly riveting one as the tough-talking doc was reading the riot act to out-of-control teens who wreaked havoc on their families. '*You are in need of some serious help, son . . . we'll be right back.*' Cue applause. She loved Dr. Phil. Loved his fatherly southern drawl and the little tidbits of advice he doled out in his no-nonsense way. She often felt things would have turned out differently for her if Dr. Phil had been her father, or at least an actively involved uncle.

Another thing Brynn liked about Dr. Phil was that he was easy to quote. This came in handy during arguments with Eric. *Do you want to be right, or do you want to be happy?* she'd asked Eric during a fight about whether or not to have another baby. Eric had a wariness about only children. He felt they grew into selfish, needy adults more likely to murder their sleeping parents or run corrupt companies. The fact that Brynn was an only child didn't seem to soften his views, nor did he budge when she reminded him that the Menéndez brothers were *brothers*. For her part, Brynn didn't feel she could take on another baby at this stage; after all, she and Jenny had The Schedule to maintain. But Eric was relentless, begging her to try for a boy, as if she could influence the sex of their child by sheer focus. *Do you want to be right*, she'd asked again, *or do you want to be happy?*

Both! Eric had yelled, which had flustered her. Could you have both? Was that against the rules? Had she missed something? Mid-argument, she'd lost the thread of what the phrase even meant. She had thought it meant that sometimes you had to choose to be happy without the thing you wanted, or in spite of someone else's irksome characteristics, rather than strive to be right all the time – which would, in turn, make you unhappy. It was why she let Eric think she'd voted for his guy when she'd really voted for the other guy, because she didn't care about being right – about proving something to Eric – she wanted to be happy, and that meant keeping the peace.

Wait, did that make sense?

It was about compromise, wasn't it?

Eric had a way of making her doubt herself like this, of twisting her thoughts up in knots. She was certain she'd have been able to win this battle if only she'd been able to watch a full episode of *Dr. Phil*! But Jenny woke up halfway through, every day, without fail. The Schedule required sacrifice.

They hadn't come to any decision about a second child, but she could tell by the way Eric had been flirting with her, calling her 'babe', trying to be more helpful and thoughtful, that his plan was simply to wear her down. And eventually he probably would. It was easier, Brynn figured, to give in. Easier to give herself to him, to another baby, than it was to explain to Eric how much she was looking forward to Jenny starting kindergarten next year. Easier than describing how desperate she was to have some hours in the day to herself. If she dislodged one brick by, say, sharing with Eric that she sometimes found herself resenting Jenny, that sometimes she even ignored her on purpose – even when she'd clearly heard her call out for her – she risked the whole wall tumbling down.

One of her secrets – which only Lisa knew – was that Brynn had almost called off her engagement to Eric. *Why do you have to get married?* Lisa had asked her, stupefied when Brynn had presented the small diamond on her finger. And in that moment Brynn couldn't deny her own misgivings. She was only twenty-two years old, marrying someone she'd only known for a few months, who was ten years her senior, whose narrow worldview didn't leave much wiggle room and who she hadn't even slept with. *What if he has a micro-penis!* Lisa had said. *Or is terrible in bed!*

She had a point, Brynn had thought. But to admit that it mattered to her whether or not sex with Eric would be pleasurable felt like breaking the rules she'd imposed on herself after *The Song*. She'd broached the topic with Dr. Clay – who was herself a secret, as Brynn had known immediately that Eric wasn't a Therapy Guy. Dr. Clay had asked her to consider the concept of self-sabotage. Was Brynn, perhaps, unsure whether she deserved someone like Eric? Could this be why she was considering breaking off the engagement? Brynn

wasn't sure, but she was certain that something was . . . *off*. That she was supposed to be happier than she was, to be less afraid that if she relaxed too much, let her guard down, Eric might see something damaged inside her.

She had planned to break up with him at the bowling alley, somewhere bright and public so he wouldn't get too upset. Elderpool Lanes smelled of musty bowling shoes, and the sour odor of decades-old beer infusing the even older carpet made her already anxious guts twist. To her annoyance, they were assigned a lane right next to a group of guys Eric knew from the gym. They greeted Eric with hearty pats on the back and punches to the arm. She'd considered feigning illness and going home, but the thought of walking the three miles back to the apartment she shared with Lisa stopped her. It became swiftly apparent by the ironic princess hat his friends had forced him to wear that it was the tallest of the group, Lawrence's, birthday.

'This is my fiancée, Brynn,' Eric had said, putting his arm around her shoulder. Ten heads looked her up and down, assessing her, and then nodded their approval, congratulating Eric. Nobody congratulated her. She wasn't in the mood to join their party, she wasn't in the mood for a drink stronger than the light beer she'd planned on, she wasn't even in the mood to be at the bowling alley – but her mood didn't matter. She and Eric were absorbed into Lawrence's birthday party. They took tequila shots and forgot to keep score.

A few hours later, she found herself sitting on Eric's lap around one of the cheap plastic tables near the bar, waiting on the French fries they'd ordered – which she desperately needed to soak up the tequila currently circulating in her bloodstream, when one of the guys wearing a trucker hat brought up the pipeline that had been dominating the local news.

'Those fucking hippies,' Trucker Hat said. 'I guess if you don't have a job, then other people's jobs don't matter to you either.' There was a murmur of agreement and someone knocked their beer glass against Trucker Hat's to punctuate the matter.

'That Freya Thomas,' another guy, this one with a military-grade buzz cut, chimed in, 'next time she ties herself to a tree, I'd like to be there for target practice.' Brynn's shoulders tensed. Freya was the de-facto leader of the Elderpool Environmentalists, having cut her teeth

crewing on the *Arctic Sunrise*, a Greenpeace ship whose sole purpose was to be a thorn in the side of Russian oil drilling. Brynn remembered a presentation Freya had given to Brynn's seventh-grade biology class, where she'd regaled them with fun facts about the native frogs and snakes she'd brought with her in special cardboard boxes.

Back then, Freya had been a commanding woman of indeterminate age with long waves of hair the color of storm clouds – it was the first time Brynn had seen a gray-haired woman who exuded energy and edginess. Her face was tanned and lined from a life spent in the elements, and her eyes matched the turquoise jewelry she had on her wrists, around her neck, on every finger and in the lobes of her ears. Brynn had been instantly besotted, and imagined what it'd be like if she were known – really and truly *known* – by someone as brave and selfless as Freya Thomas. Any time she caught a glimpse of Freya on the news or in the local paper, she felt a stirring in her core.

'*The animals, the animals*,' Buzz Cut continued in a voice Brynn supposed was intended to mimic Freya's, 'save the animals!'

'Save 'em for breakfast,' said Lawrence, prompting guttural laughs all around.

'Thing is,' Trucker Hat added after a loud burp, 'until those tree-hugging socialists want to walk their talk and live in a log cabin in the woods with no power, no cars, no gas stoves to cook their fucking tofu or whatever, they need to get out of the way. I say the Governor should just send in the cops and destroy their little tent village, haul 'em all off to jail.' More murmurs of assent, and more clinking of pint glasses. At some point the French fries had arrived, but Brynn had lost her appetite.

'The animals matter,' someone said quietly. A voice she recognized. Her own? *Her own.* The table fell silent; everyone stared at her. She felt as though she had a hairball stuck in her throat. This was something she cared about, that she had been paying attention to. She wanted to tell them that it wasn't just animals the pipeline threatened, but plant life and birdlife, insects and reptiles, the lake and all the fish in it. But the words wouldn't come. The faces of the men around her – mocking, patronizing, predatory – transported her back to her sophomore year, to *The Song*. By attempting authenticity, speaking from her heart, she'd made herself vulnerable again. And vulnerability,

she'd learned the hard way, was dangerous. She couldn't speak, she'd gone mute, and had the odd sensation that she might have literally lost the ability to speak forever.

'Oh, no, Mitchell,' Buzz Cut said, addressing Eric, 'don't tell us you're marrying a tree hugger.'

'Hey now,' Eric said, placing the palm of his hand firmly on her back, 'Brynn's not wrong.' The circle of men groaned in protest. Eric continued, his voice measured and calm, 'Freya Thomas and those hippies don't have a monopoly on caring about animals. You ask me, it's us, the hunters and the fishermen, who are the real environmentalists. It's not wrong to worry about how the pipeline might affect fish and game. Doesn't mean we stop the pipeline, just means we make sure there's enough deer around to fill our freezers.' His words seemed to cast a spell over the men. Brynn could sense the red cloud of rage that had been forming over their table dissipating. Eric had managed to take her words and make them sound as if she'd been agreeing with them all along. And rather than feel patronized and misunderstood, she'd been grateful, impressed. It struck her as the first time in her entire life that a man had ever stuck up for her.

Years later she would marvel at how cheaply she'd been won over, how paltry had been the price of her capitulation. All because he'd saved her from the scrutiny of men she didn't even know or care about. Years later it would keep her up at night. Years later she would replay the scene in her head, imagining herself making different choices, of carrying out her plans for that evening and ending things with Eric. But in that moment she'd felt an intoxicating warmth, a kind of pain in her chest, a dizzying giddiness – and decided that it must be love.

And from this decision, another one was born. She decided she'd take cover in tradition – in marriage and motherhood. She would domesticate herself. She would bury herself in The Schedule. She would let the old Brynn go, the one who had longed to be a Freya Thomas – purposeful, driven and free – in order to usher in the new Brynn: Mrs. Mitchell, Jenny's mom – a tame deer, but a protected one. She would trade in her desires, her selfhood and her courage for the safety of Eric's steadying palm on her back.

Three pm and Jenny was mainlining her daily allotment of screen time while Brynn sat on the couch behind her and took the *Which* Sex and the City *Character Are You?* quiz in a six-year-old *Cosmopolitan* with the cover missing that she'd purloined from the dentist's office. She would very much have liked a glass of chardonnay with an ice cube, but it was too early, so instead she sipped a Black Razzberry LaCroix. Brynn could see where another woman had used a ballpoint pen to circle letters up and down the columns. There was something sticky on the corner of the page that Brynn decided to ignore.

She reckoned she'd once been well on her way to being a *Samantha*. Thirteen years old, licking her lips and arching her back in front of her friends' dads. Fourteen years old, making out with girls at parties, smashing their Dr. Pepper lip-glossed mouths against each other in kitchens surrounded by stolen kegs and plastic bottles of sugary schnapps, one eye on the ring of teenaged boys and some older brothers home from college circling them like a hunting party, closing in. After all, the entire performance was designed especially for them.

No matter that she'd still worn braces.

No matter that she was getting a *reputation.*

After *The Song*, Dr. Clay had tried to uncover why Brynn had been so interested in sex at such a young age, but Brynn didn't feel like there was some original reason – there was no event, no abuse, no external influence. It had, at the time, simply felt natural to her. Some girls liked horses, Brynn had explained to Dr. Clay, some girls liked makeup. Brynn liked sex (and horses and makeup). And although she hadn't had the words to describe it, she'd also been acutely aware of her youth, and how fleeting it was. Unlike Lisa and the other girls she knew, Brynn thought all the time about the fact that she would grow old and die. It was a habitual thought that had worn a deep groove in her mind, and which galvanized her with a sense of urgency, that she needed to enjoy every drop of her youth while she could.

She stared at the quiz, chewing on her pen. Now, she was hoping for a *Carrie* but expecting an innocuous *Charlotte*, not daring to dream of a *Miranda* – with all her career-driven purpose.

But Brynn never found out which character she was; instead, she

gave up after the first question:

1. *You go to get a mani-pedi, what color do you choose?*
   a) Champagne Pink
   b) Chic Cherry
   c) Freaky Fuchsia
   d) Clear

What the hell was *Champagne Pink*? Was *clear* even a color? The question plagued her. Which color *would* she choose? Did she have a color? These days, Brynn figured her color was Play-Doh green or dish-soap yellow – hues that she associated with bruises or putrefaction. She tossed the magazine across the room and Ginger, thinking it was a game, jumped up from her doggie bed and retrieved it for her.

She had a sudden urge to discuss the quiz with another woman. But she wouldn't call Lisa, and no other candidate felt comfortable. Eric had left for work at 7 am, so that was – Brynn did the calculations in her head – nine hours since she'd spoken to another adult, to anyone other than Jenny. No, that wasn't true, she'd called the pediatrician and spoken to the receptionist when she'd made an appointment for Jenny's checkup. There had also been a call on her cell phone which had turned out to be a wrong number.

'Luisa?' a man's voice had asked, a note of panic around the edges.

'No, sorry, wrong number,' Brynn answered. She was certain Luisa was the man's lover, judging by the expectation and worry in his voice when Brynn had answered instead. Were they very much in love? Had they had a lover's quarrel? Was he calling to apologize? Was he calling to find out how she was progressing with her very important life's work? The man hung up before Brynn could find out. Now, she wishes she could call Luisa. She feels like Luisa would have something interesting and uncommon to say, that she'd agree with Brynn that *clear* wasn't a color.

All around her, Brynn knew that there were dozens of other stay-at-home moms in their houses feeling isolated and depressed, desperate for some adult conversation, wearing the same t-shirt they'd

slept in and sipping from a mug of cold coffee, oatmeal in their hair. Off the top of her head she could name six within walking distance: Logan's mom, Kylie's mom, Cedar's mom, Alia's mom, Henry and Hopper's mom and Nick Junior's mom.

But Brynn didn't see herself in these women. She had the sense that – despite their temporary mommy madness – they wanted no more than they had. How would they have reacted to the quiz? Would they have thought it was dumb like Brynn did? Or would they have completed it, mining it for some validation, some bit of arcane information about themselves? Why, Brynn thought, throwing the magazine for Ginger again, did she need a quiz to tell her who she was?

The day's unexpected intrusions – Lisa's relentless calling, old memories surfacing, the specter of Luisa and the quiz – had all conspired to make her anxious and jittery. On the television, Big Bird was singing a song about cooperation, and Jenny – slack-jawed and wide-eyed – scooched closer to the screen, unconsciously dancing along.

I am inside my body, Brynn assured herself, and felt the first flutter of relief, a small lessening of the vice-like grip around her chest. She continued, *My body is inside an old pair of jeans and my favorite green wool sweater* – and felt an increase in oxygen flowing into her lungs. *I am sitting on the couch*, she went on, *and the couch is in the house, the house is on the street* . . . until the anxiety receded, and she could will herself to get up and unload the dishwasher.

It was Dr. Clay who had planted the seeds of the Universe Game, one summer afternoon when Brynn was sixteen. She'd been seeing Dr. Clay once every two weeks since *The Song*. Her parents had insisted on it after she'd refused to go back to school, feigning illness of an indeterminate origin, a pain that seemed to roam all over her body. Her parents had both looked at her with unmitigated fear when she'd stood

before them, tears sluicing down her red face, fists balled, insisting that she would never go to school again. That she would rather die. That she meant it. Henry and Dana didn't have time for a hysterical teenage girl – the store was too busy – so they'd booked her in to see Dr. Clay and enlisted Lisa to convince her to go.

After their first few sessions, Dr. Clay decided that Brynn was struggling with anxiety attacks.

'I want to give you a tool to try, next time you have that feeling. We can practice it here together.'

'Okay.'

'The key is to try to stay in your body, Brynn, to bring your awareness to your physical being like an anchor in a rough sea: when your thoughts and feelings start to get stormy, anchor them to your body. I'm going to show you a simple exercise you can do anywhere, anytime.'

'Okay.'

'It's called "Five Things" – use your fingers to count. Start with your thumb and go through to your pinky. For each finger, say the sentence: I can feel . . . and then say something that you can actually *feel* with your *body*. Not an emotion, but a physical *sensation*.'

'Okay.'

'So, for example, I might say: "I can feel my earrings hanging from my earlobes." Can you try?'

'Um, okay. Um. I can feel, um. I can feel this pillow against my chest.'

'Good, good,' Dr. Clay made a note, 'keep going.'

But when Brynn put 'Five Things' into practice alone in her room, she found that five wasn't nearly enough to keep her anchored within herself, to make the storm clouds thundering in her chest dissipate. It wasn't long before she'd turned 'Five Things' into what she named the Universe Game – because it often wasn't until she'd imagined herself bodiless, her atoms merging with distant nebulae, that she felt her spirit settle, and her breaths deepen.

They had arrived at the outside time portion of The Schedule, so

Brynn and Jenny bundled up and made their way to the backyard. Jenny had requested that they make a snowman. The snow-covered lawn was smooth, untouched, like an empty piece of paper, and Brynn almost called Jenny back from ruining it, but she bounded ahead, Ginger in tow, and launched herself into the snow, arms and legs waving as she made herself an angel. Brynn was surprised when she felt a profound wave of unexpected contentment wash over her. Maybe it was the scent of burning firewood coming from a nearby chimney, mingling with the non-scent of snow and ice – a smell more like an idea, an absence, an unplayed note, the scent of *clear*.

Maybe she'd just needed some fresh air.

Maybe it was because she was edging closer to an acceptable time for her nightly glass of chardonnay.

Maybe it was that she loved Jenny the exact right percentage after all.

Maybe it was the sense she had – though she couldn't pinpoint why – that all would be well between Luisa and her lover.

Whatever the reason, she knew it wouldn't last. It never did. So she did her best to really notice it. To be, as Dr. Clay had explained to her all those years ago, present for the moments that felt good, so she could reach for them when things felt bad. She managed to hold on to the feeling while she and Jenny constructed the three-sphered body of the snowman – who Jenny promptly named Popsicle, which Brynn found genuinely funny. She held on to it while they pressed two fallen branches from Brynn's favorite sugar maple into Popsicle's sides for arms, and arranged dug-up pebbles into its face for eyes. She held on to it while she ran inside to grab a carrot out of the fridge, and while she ran back out again to hand it solemnly to Jenny: 'You do the honors,' she told her, and Jenny stabbed Popsicle's face with the carrot. A nose! 'Popsicle needs a mouth,' Jenny announced, and set about pulling strips of bark off the paper birch tree at the far end of the yard. 'Teeth,' she explained, as she wedged bits of gray-brown bark into a grim uneven line beneath the carrot nose. Jenny was pleased with her work.

Brynn regarded Popsicle. He was monstrous. Jenny wrapped her arms around Popsicle's waist, careful not to dislodge his arms, oblivious to how grotesque her creation was, and told him she loved

him. But something about Popsicle scared Brynn, and she abruptly decided it was time to go inside. By the time they made their way up the back steps to the back door, Brynn calling for Ginger over her shoulder, she had returned to her normal state of low-level certainty that no matter how many times she'd been told otherwise, the sky was indeed about to fall.

Back inside the house, her phone pinged with a text message from Eric: *U Ok babe? Hey, sorry, but I'm gonna be a little late tonight. Reports. Don't wait for me for dinner.* Brynn's first thought was relief. She didn't mind the nights Eric worked late. She smiled a little as she sent him an *Ok honey, love U* response. He'd called her babe, he'd asked her if she was okay, he'd been trying to be kind to her after what had happened at Jenny's party. She'd try to be kind to him, too.

In the living room, Brynn plopped Jenny in front of the low, paint-spattered table for arts and crafts time – and went to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of chardonnay, one ice cube, the taste of which brought the memory of the other night with Lisa into sharp focus, and this time she was too tired to keep it at bay.

All the other guests had long since gone home, but Lisa had had far too much to drink and fallen asleep on Brynn and Eric's bed, wearing one of Eric's flannel shirts. Trust Lisa to go overboard at a fourth birthday party, Brynn had thought as she gently shook her awake. Still, Brynn had tried to be kind. She knew Lisa had felt ashamed after the birthday present debacle, and that's probably why she'd drunk so much. Brynn had been trying to help Lisa into Eric's car while he searched the house for Lisa's purse. He'd offered to drive Lisa home while Brynn tidied up the mess from the party. 'Come on, you can do it, one foot up,' she'd coaxed her like a child.

'You fucking cunt,' Lisa said, laughing, still holding Brynn's hand and trying to heave herself up into the car.

'What?' Brynn asked, certain she'd misheard her as she reached

across Lisa's lap for the seatbelt.

'You heard me, cunt. Miss Cunty Cunterson. Slutty Sluterson.'

'Jesus, Lisa, what the hell –?'

And then she'd started singing.

The Song.

The song that had followed Brynn around from early in tenth grade until she'd graduated two and a half years later. The song that had altered her DNA. The song that had cracked the mirror in which she'd always gazed upon herself with kindness and hope until she'd seen herself in shards of self-loathing, shame and guilt. *The Song* had been coined by Kyle Leichardt and his asshole friends after a particularly wild party at Kyle's house. Brynn still couldn't remember it clearly. Three shots of peach schnapps, two hits of ecstasy and countless joints had, by most accounts, made her quite amorous. Lisa told her the next day that she'd been trying to instigate an orgy. That she had been walking through the party topless, trying to recruit participants, singing 'Touch Me' in her best Jim Morrison voice.

In the end, she'd gone into the master bedroom with Kyle and two of his friends. What occurred between them was a blur of limbs and nausea. The following Monday as she got off the school bus by the cafeteria, she was greeted by the three of them singing '*In Brynn Plover, over and over . . .*' to the tune of 'Crimson and Clover'.

It spread like wildfire.

It announced her entrance into cafeterias and gymnasiums, it trailed her into the locker room and library.

It found her outside of school at the mall and at the lakefront.

It serenaded her under her bedroom window.

She'd cried for weeks, *in Lisa's arms.*

She'd considered suicide; decided on car exhaust as her preferred method.

She'd watched, alone, as the Space Shuttle *Columbia* disintegrated on television, killing all seven astronauts, and she wished she'd been one of them.

It had been Lisa who cajoled her into staying alive, one agonizing day after the other. *You can't kill yourself before the new Radiohead album comes out*, she'd said, which had made half of Brynn's mouth smile – a massive improvement over the ever-present grimace she'd

been walking around with for days on end.

Eventually, after weeks of hiding in her room, leaving only to see Dr. Clay, she steeled herself to go back to school. Lisa had stuck by her, encouraging her to just ignore anyone who taunted her, reminding her that Kyle and his friends were just a bunch of immature dickheads.

Now, all these years later, Lisa was climbing into *her* husband's car, wearing *her* husband's shirt, calling her the c-word and singing *The Song*. By the time Eric came out with Lisa's purse in his hand, Lisa had passed out again and Brynn was dumbstruck. Recalling it now, Brynn realized she'd been gripping her wineglass so tightly it's a wonder she didn't crush it.

As if summoned by the memory, Lisa's name popped up on her phone again. And again, Brynn declined the call. Ginger nuzzled her leg and whimpered, signaling that she needed to go out.

'Okay, girl,' Brynn said, getting up from the kitchen table, and crossing the room toward the sliding glass door. The snow was coming down harder now in fat icy pellets. Brynn opened the door and the dog darted past her like a bullet, beelining directly for the new snowman and emptying her bladder. *Oh, not on Popsicle!* Brynn thought as she stepped onto the back deck, wishing she'd put on her snow boots, *tsk*ing Ginger, who disappeared further into the yard, which had already begun to grow dark and shadowy with the early winter night. From where she stood, Brynn could see both the back of Jenny's head bent in concentration over her coloring book and the steam rising off Ginger's urine.

Brynn squinted at the landscape before her: a black and white line drawing of the sugar maple tree, its branches bereft of leaves, flanked by fence posts and utility poles, a circle of wooden yard chairs poking through the snow like tombstones. The yards on either side of theirs were identical. Beyond the back fence was the high stone wall that encircled all of Elderpool Terrace, and beyond that, nothing but more snow and more shadows.

Brynn hated winter, the cold grip it had on everything.

As she watched Ginger inspect something under one of the half-buried chairs, digging furiously with her front paws, Brynn imagined having a day to herself at the lake in summer, floating on her back in her favorite blue bikini, content with the red and orange kaleidoscope

light show behind her eyelids. She imagined drying off on her towel, burying her feet in the hot sand, and reading a paperback – something easy and sexy with a heroine full of dangerous secrets – something that didn't require a thing from her.

'Ginger, come girl!' Brynn yelled. The dog ignored her. Brynn could see that she was eating something, probably some rotted trash or worse, a carcass of some description.

'Ginger, no! Stop it!' she yelled, trying to remember if she had any of the chicken-flavored doggie toothpaste left under the sink.

Dammit, she thought as she headed down the back steps toward the dog.

Then she was suddenly horizontal, and for the briefest of moments she might have been taking flight before the earth tugged her downwards. *Fuck*, she thought.

And then came pain like a cleaver halving her skull.

Pain like a guillotine.

Pain that felt bespoke, tailored just for her.

Over and over, she thought as she lay in the snow, her legs draped across the bottom stair, her torso on the ground, Ginger licking her upturned face. She was aware that her mind had gone into a sort of hyperdrive, translating physical sensations into vital information at a rapid clip: *This pain in your hip is dangerous, this piercing in your temple is worrisome, this throbbing in your ankle is alarming. You need help. Help. Help.* But she could not make a sound.

In this unnatural position, upside-down and twisted, she could see Popsicle. From this vantage point he only looked more grotesque; an angry, wounded monster. *Like a warning*, her brain – which was glitching and sputtering – told her, an *avertissement* – because in her brain's desperate attempts to alert her to the signals her wounded body was sending her, it had begun to translate everything into the only other language she knew.

Like death in a mime costume – *la mort en costume de mime . . .*

Like a ghost – *un fantôme*, singing her into a dark sleep.

In Brynn Plover, over and over . . . Encore et encore.

Chapter Two

At the last minute on the morning of Jenny's birthday party, Lisa had changed back into the sensible sweater set and khaki slacks she'd started in before briefly changing into jeans and a cleavage-showcasing blouse; Eric would prefer the sweater set. *What will Brynn be wearing?* she wondered. *How will she do her hair?* Lisa caught her train of thought by the throat and tried to strangle it; she knew it wasn't healthy to let these thoughts breathe.

Regarding herself in the bathroom mirror, Lisa fussed and lamented over her recently shorn, dyed black hair – she'd gotten a pixie cut on a whim, images of Mia Farrow and Scarlett Johansson on her mind, but instead it looked like a toupée, and a bad one at that; a stranger's hair on her head. She had burst into tears at the salon, staring at the long strands of her hair on the floor all around her like shrapnel. At Lisa's reaction, the junior stylist, scissors in hand like a smoking gun, had also burst into tears, and when the manager came over to see what all the crying was about, Lisa saw a flicker of horror pass across her face. It was then that Lisa knew it was unsalvageable. 'We won't charge you,' the manager had said, wincing.

With much concentration and watching of YouTube videos, Lisa had managed – with *a lot* of styling gel and hairspray – to mold and form her hair into something that at least passed for intentional, rather than the butchery it had been.

She applied shiny foundation and mattifying powder thickly over her acne scars, and, poking at her reflection in the mirror with a long, acrylic, French-manicured finger, she tried to convince herself of what the *Boss Bitch* newsletter she subscribed to insisted were universal truths: 'You are beautiful, and you are enough,' she said to her face, squinting her eyes in an attempt to blot out her hair, 'you are full of potential, and you have no need to compare yourself to others.' But

Lisa was neither a boss nor a bitch – not the good kind of bitch, at least. She worried she had become the other kind. She exhaled loudly, and considered skipping Jenny's party. Looking back, she should have.

Brynn hadn't seen Lisa's haircut yet. Unlike every other time either of them got a haircut, or highlights, or a mani-pedi, or did anything that in any way altered their appearance, this time there had been no selfie taken, no text message sent asking for Brynn's honest opinion. Instead, Lisa had googled things like *how to make your hair grow back fast*, and *meditations for growing hair*. When the internet told her it took roughly one month to grow half an inch of hair, she'd despaired. She'd briefly considered buying a wig.

Brynn's Audrey Hepburn face flashed through Lisa's mind, followed by her perfect, slim body that seemed to have forgotten it was ever pregnant and her thick auburn curls that never needed styling.

'Enough,' she told her reflection, '*enough*.'

She checked her tongue in a mirror covered with toothpaste flecks and post-it notes scribbled with inspirational quotes: *Be the change you want to see in the world*, and *You have to be in it to win it* – quotes that seemed to mock her as she plucked an errant chin hair. Brynn probably didn't have chin hairs. Unless they suddenly became a sign of female beauty and worth, Lisa thought ruefully, then Brynn would have *all* the chin hairs, and Lisa would have none.

All week long, standing behind the check-in counter of the Elderpool Ramada Express, magnetizing key cards and giving out wi-fi passwords, Lisa had fantasized about Eric. Imagined him walking through the automatic doors, the collar of his winter coat turned up, stamping snow off his boots and breathing into his cupped hands. She imagined him striding purposefully toward her, leaning across the counter and informing her that he'd like to request a room for himself, and that he'd like her to join him. *Needed* her to join him . . .

Lisa hadn't been raised religiously, but she knew that this longing for her best friend's husband straddled more than a few of the big sins: Lust, Greed, Envy, even Gluttony if you considered how much she wanted to devour him. Still, she couldn't help herself. The more she observed him in the background – quick hello-how-are-yous when she visited, followed by the inevitable *I'll leave you girls alone* – the more she saw how amazing he was.

‘Stop,’ she told herself. And she tried to stop, she really, really did.

She wrapped herself in her formless down jacket, snug across her ample backside, which Brynn constantly drew attention to in the innocuous tones of a compliment. *What I wouldn’t give for a butt like yours*, Brynn would tell her. *You know what they say, men love a little cushion for the pushin’.* Maybe that was true, Lisa accepted. After all, butts were in right now. Did Eric agree? Or did he prefer Brynn’s pert little pincushion to Lisa’s, which was more like a pillow you’d sit on to meditate.

She tucked Jenny’s present under her arm, a princess dress-up set replete with glittery heels, a tiara, fake plastic lipsticks and a feather boa. She’d purchased it at Louey’s, where she’d been trying to catch a glimpse of Eric, who happens to be the regional manager, not that that’s the reason why she chooses to shop there.

Lisa had felt uncertain about her choice as she’d wrapped Jenny’s gift that morning. What if Dana and Henry had bought the same gift? Or what if she already had it? Still, she knew Jenny couldn’t get enough of this crap, and Lisa loved to make Jenny smile, loved asking her if she was her favorite auntie in the whole wide world – Jenny always said yes.

An alert pinged on her phone: her taxi – she definitely planned on having a few wines – was waiting outside. Taking one last glimpse in the mirror by her front door, she looked herself dead in the eye and said: ‘She’s your best friend. She loves you. You love her.’ And walked out the door.

The taxi had to stop several houses down the block from Brynn and Eric’s, as the SUVs and minivans with bumper stickers of little stick-figure families and baby-on-board placards surrounded their house like a toddler-wielding SWAT team. Thanking the driver, Lisa exited the bright yellow car, which made her feel even more clownish and conspicuous than her new haircut already did, and navigated her way across snowdrifts and brown slush. As she approached, she eyed the house with her usual covetous suspicion.

Silhouettes of partygoers were visible behind the frosty glass,

holding red plastic cups filled with grown-up drinks, their names scribbled on with a Sharpie. Lisa could see their wide, animated smiles, but if Brynn was to be believed – and Lisa was not always sure she was – they were all secretly comparing their children, spouses and parenting skills. Big helium balloons emblazoned with the number 4 and Disney princesses were tied to the front porch, bobbing unenthusiastically in the half-hearted breeze.

Lisa let herself in, took off her shoes, and wandered further into the house. Passing through the living room, she saw Henry and Dana sitting precariously on the edge of the couch, holding their plastic cups with both hands, their coats still on, watching the floor under their feet with deep concentration as if they were hoping a sinkhole would appear and swallow them up. A cluster of fathers (What did you call a group of fathers? A *murder* of fathers, a *swarm* of fathers? Judging by the way these ones seemed so docile, so domesticated, happy as long as they'd been fed and watered, she reckoned a *herd* of fathers would suit them just fine) stood in an uneasy huddle near the fireplace, beer bottles in hand, trying to talk sports and politics and pretend they had something in common besides the ankle-biters darting around their legs. A circle of mothers (a *gaggle*? a *school*? a *pack*?) sat on the carpet while three not-quite-crawling babies moved like miniature beached whales, rolling and lolling to and fro. Lisa watched as one of the mothers deftly inserted her engorged brown nipple into her daughter's mouth, and instantly felt her own body as a kind of husk, ornamental but fundamentally useless. Instead of repulsing her, she felt a tug toward their circle, as if absorption into their energy field would unlock something primal and powerful inside of her. But as quickly as she thought this, she sensed a barrier between her body and theirs. She felt frozen out by these women; the subtle shifts in their bodies closed any gap where she might have sidled up alongside them to say hello.

Logically, she knew that at twenty-six, it wasn't at all odd for her not to have children. These days, most women were waiting until they'd established their career, or taken the time to find themselves. And most of the time, this was what Lisa supposed she was doing: finding herself. It was just taking a little longer than she'd anticipated. If anything, it was wild that Brynn had got pregnant at twenty-two.

But, Lisa supposed, if *she'd* had the chance to settle down with Eric, she would have, too.

Lisa found Brynn in the kitchen pulling a tray of mini quiches from the oven.

'*Bonjour*, Sophie!' Lisa said brightly.

'*Bonjour*, Chloe!' Brynn responded. This had been their usual greeting since high school French class, when Madame O'Flanagan had informed them that they could choose their French names for the year. They'd both wanted Sophie, but in the end, as always, Brynn won. They'd continued to use the fancy monikers even after Lisa gave up on French, and Brynn continued into Advanced Placement.

Brynn fluttered toward her, and Lisa took her in quickly: black leggings covered by a long, gray, formless cabled sweater, UGG boots. As usual, it was Brynn's face and hair that were her main accessories; the former was carefully made to look as though she was wearing no makeup at all, her big brown eyes made even doe-ier by a swish of mascara which extended her lashes right up to her thick eyebrows – also very *in*. Her ivory skin was decorated with more than her fair share of perfectly placed freckles, as if even the sun preferred Brynn to Lisa. Her hair rose out of her skull in unruly peaks and valleys of copper curls; taller than it was long, as if someone was holding a charged balloon above her, coaxing her hair upwards; it framed her face in an auburn glow. It always made Lisa think of strawberry meringue. All of this careless, casual beauty was propped up by an unusually long neck, which was connected to a body whose clothes Lisa had stopped being able to borrow since they'd hit puberty.

Brynn took Lisa in, too. 'Your hair!' she shrieked, putting down the tray and wiping her hands on a dish towel before lifting them toward Lisa's head as if to stroke her new coif, but finding it hardened with gel and hairspray, she opted for a few awkward taps. 'When did you get this done? It suits you so much.'

Lisa wasn't sure if this was a compliment or not. Did she want this haircut to suit her? She didn't feel at all at home in it.

'Did you just get here?' Brynn asked, changing the topic, arranging the quiches on a platter.

'Yeah, figured I'd come get a drink before making small talk with the mommies club.'

Brynn uttered a half-laugh, and nodded toward the kitchen island covered in bottles of cheap wine, domestic beers and Louey's brand juice boxes. 'Write your name on your cup.'

'Need help?' Lisa asked as she wrote *Auntie Lisa* on a red Solo cup and sifted through the bottles for something half-decent. Sure, it was only eleven in the morning, but it was a Saturday, all the dads were drinking beer, and she desperately needed something stronger than fruit punch and mini quiches to relax her. She located a cabernet and gave herself a generous pour.

'No thanks, hon, all under control.' Brynn was removing tinfoil from various platters of canapés and finger sandwiches. Lisa turned to see the sliding glass door opening, and Eric and Ginger came in with a rush of cold air. Lisa's throat went dry and her stomach contracted as they always did when she saw Eric. Keeping one hand on Ginger's collar and removing his snow boots with the other, he looked up briefly and said, 'Hey, Leese, good to see ya.' Lisa's hands flew up to obscure her new haircut, hoping he wouldn't notice. She thought, worryingly, that she might cry.

'Hey, Eric, how's it going?' She tried to sound calm, normal. Before he could answer, Brynn interjected, 'Did she go?'

'Yeah, she made plenty of yellow snow,' Eric said, walking Ginger lopsidedly across to her water bowl, which she drank from sloppily. 'Didn't you, girl!' He scratched Ginger's back vigorously, his fingers disappearing in her thick hair.

'Have to keep her away from the kids,' Brynn explained to Lisa. 'There's some allergies, apparently.'

'Allergies my ass.' Eric rolled his eyes at Lisa conspiratorially. 'Overprotective parent syndrome, more like it, O.P.S.' He snagged a quiche from the platter. 'Dog allergies, peanut allergies, gluten allergies, what snowflakes! None of this was around when we were kids!'

'Eric, shush!' Brynn reprimanded, slapping his hand playfully. 'They're right in the other room!' He popped another quiche in his mouth, smiling like a little boy. '*I'm* allergic to *you*!' Brynn said ruefully while she emptied a jar of salsa into a bowl, widening her eyes at Lisa as if to say, *Can you believe this guy?* Lisa watched as Eric came up behind Brynn and grabbed her by the waist, nuzzling his head

into her hair.

'Oh really,' he said as she squirmed, 'you're allergic to me? Here's some cooties for you!' and he planted a volley of kisses on her neck. Lisa drained her cup of wine too quickly, and felt instantly woozy. *Slow down*, she told herself as she refilled it.

Ginger took the opportunity to slip past Eric and bound into the circle of babies in the living room, which was quickly followed by a chorus of 'Oh no!' and 'The dog! The dog!'

'Shit,' Brynn said, still giggling, 'go get her!'

Eric rushed into the living room yelling, 'Never fear, ladies, she hasn't eaten babies for weeks!'

'What was all *that* about?' Lisa asked, trying to sound normal. Just last night Brynn had been complaining about Eric again, calling him boring and an old fuddy-duddy.

Brynn rolled her eyes and waved her hand in the air as if Eric had left a bad odor in his wake. 'He just wants to have another baby. Trust me, the minute I get pregnant again he'll stop trying to be so charming.'

Lisa was flummoxed. She always found affection between Brynn and Eric hard to witness, but the idea of Brynn having another baby felt like an emergency. That it was something that Eric wanted more than Brynn struck her as further proof that Brynn didn't deserve Eric. At least once a month, Brynn asked her if she wanted to trade lives, and even though she always said it in a joking way, Lisa could tell that sometimes – most of the time, even – she meant it. Because what Lisa understood about Brynn that nobody else did – perhaps not even Brynn herself – was that Brynn saw her life with Eric and Jenny as penance. As a way to prove everyone who had sung *The Song* wrong. She couldn't see Eric and Jenny as the gifts that they were.

Eric was perfect. He was, quite literally, everything Lisa wanted in a man. Good-looking in a TV doctor kind of way, not intimidatingly so, but a sort of handsome you didn't quite notice at first. True, his was a generic face – his blue eyes and almost girlish mouth arranged on a chiseled face that people constantly thought they recognized from somewhere. It was such a common occurrence that Eric stopped correcting people when they insisted they'd met before. This familiarity, combined with his staple of understated khaki pants and

flannel shirts, his Midwest accent and perfect teeth, his body of average height and weight, just enough of a beer belly to make other men want to befriend him and other women want to feed him, all served to make Eric the quintessential everyman.

When the Louey's execs decided to use Eric in one of their television commercials, sales went up. Eric's was a face you could trust. An American face. A meat-eating face. A Christian face. Sure, Eric could be impatient with Brynn, but did she have any idea how irritating *she* could be? How self-centered? It was easy for Brynn to bitch to Lisa about what a bad guy Eric was, but she never admitted her own faults. Faults Lisa had been cataloging for longer than she cared to admit.

'Present time!' Brynn announced.

Lisa took a moment to compose herself. Careful not to spill her wine, she took her place on the couch next to Henry and Dana and exchanged brief pleasantries. Jenny sat in the middle of the floor with her little pointy birthday hat on while all the other kids craned their necks to see what she got, their faces an honest mix of manic surprise and soul-crushing jealousy. Jenny tore through box after box of Lego and American Girl and all kinds of other toys-du-jour before getting to Lisa's gift. She ripped apart the shooting star wrapping paper like a wild animal and beheld the sparkly high-heeled shoes, feather boa, and the bedazzled tiara in wonder, and after a brief moment of joy her little face fell and she glanced at Brynn, who looked embarrassed.

'Can I keep it, Mommy?' Jenny asked.

'We'll see, Jenny-girl,' Brynn said quickly, trying to recover. 'Thank Auntie Lisa!'

Lisa could feel all the other parents' eyes on her as Jenny plowed through a mountain of wrapping paper and bounded onto her lap, wrapping her little arms around her neck. She smelled like vanilla frosting and lemonade-scented shampoo. 'Thanks, Auntie Lisa.'

Her cup was empty. Had she had two drinks or three? she wondered as she unscrewed another bottle of cabernet, but anyway, what did it matter? It was a party, right? Lisa drank half of her newly filled cup in

the kitchen, before she caught a glimpse of Brynn, a trash bag full of ribbons and paper and cardboard boxes slung over her shoulder like Santa Claus, making her way toward the garage. Lisa followed her.

'Hey,' she asked, annoyed that her voice sounded so high-pitched, 'what was that all about?'

'What?' Brynn replied, stuffing the bag into a bin, before turning to face Lisa with what seemed like defiance, or exasperation.

'All that with the present I got Jenny. Is there something wrong?'

'No, Leese, not at all. It's lovely, she loves it. It was really nice of you.'

Lisa smiled an *I know you too well for this bullshit* smile. 'Brynnie, what the hell, tell me!'

'Fine,' Brynn said, closing her eyes. 'We're just not doing the whole high-heeled grown-up-girl thing, you know? We just don't want to go there.'

'Go *where*?' Lisa asked, incredulous.

'Well, Eric heard something on the radio about that show, you know, the one about the little girls in pageants?'

'*Toddlers & Tiaras*.'

'Yeah, well, it was all about the dangers of turning little girls into little women, you know, like making them sexy. There are a lot of predators out there, Lisa.'

'Are you *kidding* me, Brynn? I mean, it's just dress-up. She loves that stuff! We were playing with makeup just last week at my place.'

'Well, actually . . .'

'Well actually *what*?'

'Well, that was kind of one of the things that sparked it. Eric hated all that makeup on her, Leese. It really upset him. And he'd just heard that thing on the radio, and he asked that we don't do that stuff anymore.' Brynn fidgeted with her hands. 'She'll grow up soon enough, you know,' she added, trying to lighten the mood. 'You can teach her how to do her makeup then.'

'Yeah, sure. Sorry.'

'Aw, Leese, don't –'

Lisa wanted to laugh it off, but when she tried, she found her face wouldn't comply and instead she grimaced and emitted a sound more akin to a burp. The fact that she had herself doubted the gift – albeit

not for the reasons that Brynn had just explained – only made her more upset. It seemed to Lisa that no matter what she did, she was always participating in her own undoing. And this particular humiliation had happened in front of all those other women, and Eric. She felt dumb and excluded. There had been a time when Lisa would have shared her turmoil with Brynn and allowed herself to be comforted by her best friend, but instead she mumbled a curt, 'Don't worry about it,' as she turned her back and made her way into the house.

Two more full cups later, and Lisa was feeling a bit off-balance as she made her way down the hallway to the guest bathroom. It was locked. 'Just a minute!' said a stranger's voice from the other side of the door. Some playground mommy who probably thought Brynn was *her* best friend. Brynn had a way of doing that, of making everyone feel confided in, implicated. *Screw it*, Lisa thought, *I'm family*, and walked to the end of the hall into Brynn and Eric's bedroom to use their en suite. Closing the bedroom door behind her, a new tsunami of emotions barreled toward her.

She couldn't shake the feeling that something was very wrong, that she'd been accused of a crime she didn't commit. She felt she might vomit. She couldn't put a name to the emotion coursing through her – it felt something like being pranked, or like she'd entered a parallel universe. After all, it was Brynn who always complained about Eric's conservative views! It was Brynn who called him Grandpa behind his back! Brynn who confided in Lisa about her concerns that he was going down a rabbit hole, listening to too much fire and brimstone radio. Lisa didn't agree with Eric about everything but she found the fact that Eric knew himself so well, that he wasn't a fence-sitter, that he took his role as a husband and father seriously, well . . . she found it hot. But somehow she'd gotten Jenny's present wrong . . . and Eric and Brynn were on the same side? How could she have let that happen?

Since when did dress-up become a crime? They'd all grown up wearing their moms' lipstick and prancing around in high heels, and they hadn't turned into prostitutes. Well, Brynn did have her wild

years, didn't she; the years they never spoke of after Eric came into their lives. How many times had Lisa thought about telling Eric everything? He deserved to know, didn't he? Maybe that was why Brynn was going along with Eric on this makeup thing. Worried her daughter would do what she had done? Even so, with all the risks she'd taken and all she'd gotten away with, Brynn had got Eric in the end. Got to be the good girl. Got a do-over. None of it was fair.

Lisa realized she was standing in front of Eric's side of the walk-in closet, her face buried in his flannel shirts, alternating between sobs and inhalations of the faint scent of his cologne, which smelled – she thought – vaguely of candle wax and cinnamon, which made her think of Christmas, which was next month. And the thought of how different her Christmas would be from Brynn's only made her cry harder. She wasn't sure when she'd even started crying, and she couldn't recall making this detour to the closet on her way to the bathroom. She still urgently had to pee.

'What the fuck am I doing,' she said aloud. 'Get a grip,' she told herself, wiping her face on one of Eric's sleeves.

She stumbled to the bathroom and paused in front of the mirror. 'I hate you,' she said to the woman reflected back at her, to her wine-stained lips and her horrible haircut and the eyebrows she'd plucked too thinly in the early 2000s and which had never grown back. She stuck her tongue out at herself, but this seemed nightmarishly clownish and crazy, like something a psychopath would do, so she quickly turned away and almost fell as she sat down on the toilet seat. Next to her on the sink was a little porcelain dish of jewelry, of the married-Brynn department-store variety. Most of Lisa's jewelry still came from Claire's boutique sales; rings that turned her fingers green and earrings that came twelve to a piece of cardboard. A pair of simple pearl studs sat on top of a delicate gold bracelet, eyeing her, taunting her. She could almost see her smudged face in their luminescent sheen, distorted and stricken. She plucked one earring from the dish and dropped it into the toilet bowl before flushing, twice.

Before she'd even properly, blurrily, come to, Lisa was already

smarting with embarrassment, her skin crawling with shame as she sat in the passenger seat of Eric's truck. She felt like she'd been arrested by some big-hearted cop who preferred to just drive her home safely than book her. Or worse, like she'd been picked up from a party by her dad. The vibe was distinctly more *disappointed* than angry, that old chestnut. She felt small, stupid. She imagined herself shrunken and buckled into Jenny's empty car seat, which even now was reproaching Lisa from its position in the back seat. *This is the respectable car of a* parent*, Lisa,* the car seat told her. *You don't belong here.*

Eric seemed to be focusing hard on the radio, brow furrowed, head nodding in silent agreement. Lisa tried to focus . . . something about border security and immigration reform. Her mind couldn't hold on; she was too worried about vomiting. Jesus, how much wine had she drunk? How did she even get in the car? Had she done anything awful? She rolled the window down an inch, hoping the frigid air would help calm her roiling stomach. She realized she was wearing Eric's blue flannel shirt and hoped to God he'd put it on her himself.

'Doing okay over there?' Eric asked, turning down the radio.

'Yeah, okay, thanks. Jesus, sorry, Eric.' She tried closing her eyes, but that just gave her the spins.

'Need me to pull over?'

'No, no, I'm fine.'

Silence.

She could feel him looking at her out of the corner of his eye. Judging. She considered opening the door and flinging herself out. Would he save her? 'Well, I guess there's no avoiding this question.' She tried to sound sober, in control. 'What happened?'

'Well, Lisa' – her stomach plunged when she heard the sarcastic, tired note in his voice – 'it seems as if you drank too much, played dress-up in my closet, and passed out on our bed.'

'Oh, God.' Her face was hot, her neck beginning to sweat under his collar. She sank lower in the seat and stared out the window. They were flying through the empty streets of downtown Elderpool; neon signs, bus stops and darkened windows were all a sickly blur in her peripheral vision. They'd just passed Louey's, so they were still at least ten minutes from her apartment.

'You should probably call Brynn in the morning,' Eric broke the

silence, both hands determinedly on the wheel, ‘apologize, you know.’

‘Of course.’

‘You said some nasty things to her, Lisa’ – now he was stern, paternal – ‘and as her husband I have to say, I just don’t get it, why you’d be so mean to her. She’s very good to you.’

Lisa had no memory of saying anything to Brynn. The last thing she remembered was being in the garage, being lectured on what was and wasn’t appropriate for little girls these days.

‘What did I say?’

‘Honestly, Lisa,’ he glanced at her coolly, ‘I don’t really know. I just know that she was crying, and said you’d hurt her feelings. I’m sure you girls will sort it all out.’

The next morning, Lisa had lain in her bed assessing her wounds, trying to make a plan. There was the vice-like headache that needed water and Tylenol, stat. There was the nausea and dizziness that required burnt, plain toast. And there was whatever mess she’d made with Brynn and Eric. This last problem would require a specialist surgeon, and a delicate recovery. How to fix it? What exactly had she done? Her last clear memory was of the dress-up gift debacle, the hot shame she’d felt, the anger at Brynn for allowing her to walk right into the quicksand. Why hadn’t Brynn told her there were rules about presents, that what *was* and *wasn’t* considered appropriate for children was a shifting, changeable thing? Was the whole thing a setup? Had Brynn wanted to humiliate her? To what end?

After the gift-shaming, her memory gets spottier, grainier, like old eight-millimeter tape. She knew she must have had more wine; her headache was irrefutable proof of that. She remembered going into Brynn and Eric’s bathroom, via their bedroom . . . and a vague, not unpleasant memory of cinnamon-scented flannel. After that . . . very little until she was in Eric’s car, being unceremoniously transported and relocated like an old piece of furniture.

She stifled the urge to vomit and forced herself to sit up, very slowly, and make her way to her small kitchen, where she put on a pot of coffee, inserted bread into the toaster, and downed two glasses of

water standing at the kitchen sink. As she always did when she found herself in the vicinity of self-loathing, Lisa thought of her twin brother, Porter. *Fraternal*, Porter always made a point of clarifying, *not identical*. As if it required clarification. As if it weren't abundantly clear. Apart from quite clearly being different sexes, they were so very *non*-identical as to be almost funny. In fact, they were opposites. Where Lisa was short and curvy, Porter was tall and lean. In summer, Porter's skin would turn an enviable shade of caramel, while Lisa would burn and peel. However, as children, their *non*-identicalness had been only physical. When it came to their *inner* selves, their emotional impulses, their natural proclivities and wonts, they had, at one time, been well and truly twinned.

When they were younger, these had been Brynn's favorite stories about Lisa and Porter; their experiences of telepathy, of shared dreams, of finishing each other's sentences, of the magical alliance they'd had. Brynn had been fascinated by sibling life, by the concept of a brother, and a twin brother to boot. And Lisa had no shortage of stories with which to regale her. All the ways in which Lisa and Porter had, as their mother used to put it, 'creeped everyone out' with their psychic-twin powers was the dominant theme of the first twelve years of their lives.

Like the time Porter had fallen off his bicycle on his way home from soccer practice, tumbled into a ditch and fractured his tibia. These were the days before cell phones, and Porter had taken the shortcut through the woods (now the site of the Elderpool Sanctuary subdivision). Lisa, at home with their parents, had been watching *Beverly Hills, 90210* on the sofa when she was gripped by a vision so complete she fleetingly thought that it had actually flashed across the television screen: *Porter, in the ditch, hurt.* She could see the Elderpool Junior High School jersey he wore, she could see the smear of mud across his forehead, she could see his mangled bike near him, she could *smell* the sharp, antiseptic pine and *feel* the setting sun on her skin. Lisa had led her bewildered parents directly to Porter, who wasn't at all surprised to see them.

'I just kept saying *Elllllliott, Elllllliott* – like I was E.T.,' Porter regaled his family, breathlessly, 'until I knew you'd heard me.'

It was during this era of their lives that their father, a consummate dad-joker, coined the term *womb-mates* to describe his children –

which was funny the first few times but eventually became a cue for synchronized familial eye-rolling.

But the Lisa–Porter continuum was no match for hormones. It was demolished by floods of estrogen and testosterone, budding breasts and Adam's apples, acne and body odor, and the final coup de grâce: menstruation. And where puberty transformed Porter into a fearless, self-assured, wiry athlete – prone to bouts of overconfidence that gained him entry into the most popular inner circles – it went a different way for Lisa. For her, puberty marked the beginning of her certainty that something was inherently wrong with her body, that it morphed and changed shape across the span of a single day – a single hour – punishing or rewarding her based on some caprice she could not determine. Where Porter charged forward, she retreated. Where he expanded his social circle, she zeroed in on one good and true friend: Brynn Plover.

Around this time, and for reasons that Lisa never could glean, Porter had established himself as a bit of a straight-edge. 'I'm high on life,' he'd say, and somehow the way that he leaned into the dorkiness made it cool. He wore *D.A.R.E.* t-shirts to parties as he eschewed drugs and alcohol, happy to stand around with a soft drink – and still, everyone seemed to gravitate to him. His sobriety extended to girls, too. He wasn't interested in dating or taking advantage of his good looks and popularity to get into the bedrooms of the very willing throngs of cheerleaders that followed him everywhere; the only bases that interested him were literal ones on baseball diamonds. And rather than jeopardize his popularity pole position, his sobriety and seriousness only solidified it, and sparked a small trend among the elite athletes at Elderpool High. When she tried to extract an explanation from him, he just said, 'I don't like regrets,' which struck her as both beyond their shared years and naïve – Lisa didn't think regret was something you could opt out of.

Lisa *was* interested in drugs and alcohol, and she and Brynn said yes to most anything that was offered to them, but she did have Porter's ability to moderate, to avoid cataclysm. It was Brynn, not Lisa, who actively sought the attention of boys. It was Brynn, not Lisa, who seemed to fall into a kind of psychedelic stupor after just one beer, or a few hits of a joint, her limbs becoming elastic – every

movement from the sway in her walk or the shrug of her shoulders becoming suggestive, seductive. It was Brynn, not Lisa, who accrued *experiences* – which she recounted to Lisa in forensic detail. And it was Brynn, not Lisa, who had gotten a name for herself as an easy mark at lake parties, a girl likely to wander into the trees with a boy and go all the way.

Still, in those days Lisa would have followed Brynn off a cliff. They were joined at the hip, they'd gone through *everything* together. Lisa loved her. *I love her still*, Lisa reminded herself. But there was no denying it: where Brynn had been a wanton, rudderless singling, Lisa had stood on solid ground, anchored by her brother.

Then, when they were sixteen, *The Song* happened and everything changed. Lisa watched her brazen, vivacious, life-of-the-party best friend transform into a skittish, doubtful wallflower. It had broken Lisa's heart. But there was something about the post-*Song* Brynn that Lisa found suspicious. Along with her newfound hesitancy, she'd also become furtive, secretive, and Lisa got the impression that Brynn had begun to hide parts of herself from Lisa. After that, she found she was no longer jealous of Brynn's beauty or her big house – her beauty, after all, had gotten her in trouble, and her big house was lonely and empty.

Together, the two of them cruised into their first years of post-graduation freedom, getting shitty jobs and sharing a small apartment with thrift-store furniture and peeling wallpaper. Lisa had traded in her *womb-mate* for a roommate, her best friend, the yin to her yang. But then Brynn had met Eric so quickly. He was older, and as straight-edged as Porter. And when Brynn had made the spur-of-the-moment decision not to share her high-school exploits with Eric, but rather to avoid the topic altogether and portray herself to Eric as someone much less experienced – much more like Lisa herself – Lisa had dutifully gone along with it, but it had curdled something inside her.

So when she found herself sitting in her kitchen, nursing a rabid hangover and certain that she'd done something terrible yesterday, Lisa was once again rocked by the fact that Brynn had actually managed to become the upstanding wife and mother, the picture of mild, suburban composure, while it was Lisa who now swung like a pendulum, who drank herself to sleep most nights, whose morality –

especially when it came to Eric – was questionable at best.

She longed to talk to Porter.

But she rarely spoke to him these days.

When they did speak, Porter was so effusive in his kindness that it repelled her. His earnest interest in the banalities of her life – asking her genuine questions about her job at the hotel, always finding something in her appearance to compliment – embarrassed and exhausted her; it felt like he was applying lipstick on the pig of her life. She knew that if he were here now he would chide her for ignoring her instincts. *Your gut was telling you it was the wrong gift*, he'd say. *You felt uncertain when you bought it. When are you going to start to listen to yourself, Leese?* Her cheeks reddened just thinking about it.

Porter had always listened to himself, relentlessly backed himself, and this was the reason he continued to excel professionally (he was, at twenty-six, the youngest vice president of a major bank and lived between London and New York City), personally (he was married to another young wunderkind – a model turned human rights lawyer who regularly graced the cover of law magazines and was occasionally a talking head on CNN and MSNBC) and physically (he continued to turn heads everywhere he went, and his bespoke suits were tailored to his trim physique which he maintained in cult-like spin classes and diabolical boot camps that would have left Lisa in tatters). Porter's success on every front only served to sharpen the contours of Lisa's inertia, her inability to muster the energy and will to forge a life for herself beyond Elderpool's meager offerings.

But, in certain moments . . . moments like the morning after Jenny's party when she poured her cold coffee down the drain of her stained kitchen sink and felt actual envy that she, too, couldn't just be washed away, immaterialized, dissolved . . . in these moments she craved her brother's steady, encouraging love, longed to see herself through his eyes.

Sometimes she could still summon him by the sheer force of her need. Other times, no amount of concentration would result in her phone ringing. Perhaps, she often worried, he received the message, but chose to ignore it. Denied it the way that Brynn had denied her calls all morning. She thought about just calling him – cutting out the

telepathy – but the thought of him declining her call in real time felt like more than she could bear. She stared at the reflective face of her phone. *Come on Porter, come on Porter, come on Porter*, she called out in her muddled, dusty mind, *Elllliott*.

Minutes passed.

Nothing happened.

Perhaps he was on a plane, and had no reception.

Perhaps he was asleep.

Perhaps he just didn't have it in him to bolster his sister's ever-flagging self-esteem.

Instead, she got a text alert from one of the many self-help apps she subscribed to: *Don't forget to breathe*, it told her. And so Lisa took in a long deep breath and exhaled loudly, and then ran to the bathroom to throw up.

Three days had passed since Jenny's party and Lisa sat on her couch under a thick blanket, feeling generally miserable and idly staring out of the window as the branch from the maple tree that she'd complained to her building manager about tapped and scratched at the glass. Her eyes were fixated on one particular leaf that had turned a vibrant shade of red when it hit her . . . *crimson and clover . . . in Brynn Plover . . . over and over* . . . Finally, she remembered what she'd done: *The Song*. Fuck. She'd sung *The Song*. Blood thundered in her ears. Her mouth suddenly tasted of something sour and toxic, the taste of shame, of regret. A wave of anxiety barreled over her and she considered employing the Universe Game that Brynn had taught her, but somehow using the very tool that Brynn had cultivated to manage the fallout of *The Song* to attend to her own anxiety about having sung *The Song* felt deeply wrong to her, like something that wouldn't go unnoticed by whatever entity was in charge of karma.

They had argued many times over the years, about silly things, like sisters did. And they'd always made up easily, didn't hold grudges. But this . . . Lisa knew she'd crossed a line. It felt irreparable, irredeemable. Somehow, she would have to make this right. But Brynn wouldn't let her. Lisa had texted and called and then texted and called

some more, but Brynn had not responded. She thought about driving over, but worried that might just make Brynn angrier. By seven that evening, her call log informed her that she'd already made nineteen unrequited attempts to talk to Brynn. She would try once more, make it an even twenty, and if Brynn denied her again, she resolved to go over in the morning. She'd bring jumbo pumpkin spice lattes and a coloring book for Jenny and she'd grovel if she had to, she'd beg for forgiveness. Because even if things between them had become a bit weird and strained, Lisa didn't know who she was without Brynn.

She was just about to dial Brynn for the last time that night, when her phone rang.

Eric?

Chapter Three

The night of Jenny's birthday party, after he'd dropped Lisa off at her apartment, long after Brynn had finally fallen asleep at his side curled into a little ball, impenetrable as an armadillo, Eric lay – as he usually did – piercingly awake.

He excelled in most areas of his life, but he was terrible at sleeping. Nothing seemed to work. Even as a baby he'd been a bad sleeper, and as a toddler, a bad napper. A tosser and a turner and a twister of sheets. When he did find sleep, it was light and flimsy, easily shattered. He'd been to specialists and participated in clinical trials. He'd spent countless dollars on countless books and embarrassing meditation CDs he hid in a shoebox in his sock drawer. He'd bought a MyPillow he'd seen advertised on Fox News. He'd even, to his great shame, gone to see an Ayurvedic therapist in Ann Arbor who had asked questions not of him, but of his *inner child*, in an office smelling of vinegar and oatmeal cookies. Eric did not believe he had an inner child – the very concept struck him as weak, left-wing, snowflakey pabulum. In any case, nothing worked. Not the counting of sheep or the breathing exercises. Not the reading of a boring book or warm milk before bed. Not sex with his wife. Not sex with someone who *wasn't* his wife. Not white noise. Not the soothing sounds of rainstorms. Not limiting his caffeine intake or taking a brisk walk after dinner or imagining himself floating on his back, weightless, in the middle of a warm pool.

Nothing.

And in the quiet hours of his wakefulness, when he alone witnessed the three am shadows drip down their bedroom walls like syrup, when he felt like the only person in the whole world – or at least in the state of Michigan – who wasn't asleep, he came to perceive sleep itself as a sentient entity. An old, untamed god. Something that

his God, the real one, couldn't help him with. A feral, capricious pagan god that required something of him. And in these moments he made promises, pledges, oaths. Tonight, he gave his word to Sleep that he would never have sex with Carmen again, that he would be a better husband, a better father.

It had pained him to see how much Lisa had upset Brynn tonight – even if he didn't know the details. He'd felt fiercely protective of his wife, but also caught out, like a soldier who had neglected his post. He promised Sleep that he would be more vigilant, that he would commit to the weekly date night Brynn had been suggesting for the past two years. Perhaps, if he reestablished his influence on Brynn, she would finally sever ties with Lisa – a friendship that made absolutely no sense to him. He got the feeling that Brynn only kept Lisa in her life out of a sense of duty or habit. But it was clear to him that Brynn had outgrown Lisa. Brynn was a mother and a wife, she was elegant and respectable. Lisa, on the other hand, was shiftless and immature, and he didn't think she was a very good influence on Brynn – who always seemed slightly hostile to him after she'd spent time with Lisa. He didn't think she was a good influence on Jenny, either – the last time Jenny had gone over to Lisa's apartment, she'd come home with a face full of whorish makeup, and then Lisa had bought her stripper clothes for her fourth birthday! In this sleepless hour, though, even Lisa's faults seemed traceable to him. After all, it was his neglect that had opened the door for Lisa's disproportionate influence.

He promised Sleep that he'd repair the creaking floorboard in Jenny's bedroom that Brynn had been asking him to fix forever. He swore that when the snow melted and the grass was green again, he'd offer to mow Brynn's parents' lawn for them, as she'd asked him to do, and which he'd always found excuses to get out of. He hoped these promises were enough for Sleep to smile on him.

The next morning he woke up, which was how he knew he'd slept. And in the crisp lemony light of a cold November morning, the notion of bargaining with a lesser deity felt humiliating and beneath him. He'd forgotten about the promises he made by his first sip of coffee.

When Eric was fifteen years old, he had wanted to be a wrestler. He and his brothers would sit inches from the television, elbowing each other out of the way, jockeying for prime position to watch *WWF Wrestling Challenge* and *Superstars of Wrestling* on the twenty-seven-inch Fisher TV. When wrestling wasn't on television, they'd watch the countless VHS tapes they'd recorded. At night, he'd lie in bed surrounded by posters of Hulk Hogan, Rowdy Roddy Piper, Stone Cold Steve Austin and Macho Man Randy Savage. There were no posters of girls on his walls (though he did have a few dirty magazines stashed between his mattress and the bedframe) – rather, he was surrounded by a pantheon of male strength and muscle, of brute force and unstoppable mass.

Eric wanted to be hulking, to be rowdy, to be stone cold, savage and macho, but at fifteen, while he wasn't exactly scrawny, he was a far cry from his heroes. Still, he'd held his own on the wrestling team at North High School in Akron, Ohio, and had managed to make it to the State Championships in Columbus where, in the winter of 1991, he would leave it all on the mat at the Columbus Civic Center. His whole family were in the stands when he squared off with his opponent: sixteen-year-old Javier Lopez from Cleveland.

The two boys put their toes on the line, shook hands, and then took their places on opposite ends of the mat. The whistle blew, and the two-minute clock for the first period began. Eric crouched low and lunged, determined to start strong. Immediately he got the sense that Javier was nervous, that he was playing the mat. The ref blew his whistle, and yelled 'Mat!' confirming Eric's suspicions, and the distance between their bodies closed. Eric saw his opportunity, executing a perfect takedown. *Two points*, he thought, but Javier was up before he could pin him. He tried again, but Javier managed an escape – *one point*. Mad now, Javier seemed to grow and expand before his very eyes – like the other Hulk – and went at Eric hard, trying to finish him, but Eric escaped – *one point*. And then the whistle blew to signal the end of the period.

For the next round, Eric began crouching like a bulldog. Lopez got in position behind him, wrapping his arms around Eric's waist. Eric corkscrewed himself out of Lopez's arms and within seconds had gone from the bottom to the top – *reversal, two points*. He tried for a

takedown, but Lopez escaped and in a flash had Eric in a headlock. They grappled, and Eric had just managed to pull his head out of Lopez's grip when the whistle blew again.

The final period. The cheers and roars of the crowd ringing in his ears, the two boys eyeing each other like panting, wounded lions. Eric worked harder than he ever had, and managed what he believed were two back-to-back near-falls – *three points each.* He finally managed to get Javier on the mat, but before he knew it, Javier had managed a reversal (*two points*) and Eric found himself on his back, the wind knocked out of him. But it wasn't a pin – Javier couldn't manage to gain any purchase. They were both furious and their next contact was chaotic, with Javier ending up behind Eric, twisting his arm upwards in an illegal hammerlock (*one point deducted!*) and Eric bit down hard on his mouthguard. The ref blew his whistle and said, 'Unsportsmanlike conduct!' and Eric and Javier squared off again, sweat pouring down their faces. Before Eric had a chance to make his next maneuver, the whistle blew: time.

Eric may not have won by pin, but he had a good chance to win by points. He tried to do the math in his head, but he was feeling too dizzy. Still, on balance, he felt like he'd won. Then the judge's voice in the staticky loudspeaker said, *Lopez!* and Eric threw up all over the mat while Marky Mark's 'Good Vibrations' blasted through the gymnasium.

On the two-hour drive back to Akron, nobody said anything for a while. Finally his dad, gripping the steering wheel, said, 'That match was stolen from you, son.'

'*Jack*,' Eric's mom said in a low voice, putting her hand on his dad's arm. He shook it off.

'Listen up, all of you,' his dad said, looking in the rearview mirror at his three sons and one daughter. 'Those *people* will try to take everything from you if you let them, do you hear me?' They nodded in unison.

'*Jack*,' his mom said again, a little louder.

'Don't *Jack* me, Sharon,' his dad replied, and Eric and his siblings had to stifle a laugh. His dad snarled as he turned to look at his mom so suddenly the station wagon veered to the right, then overcorrected to the left before straightening out again. 'They need to know what

kind of world they're growing up in.' He looked in the rearview mirror again. 'Just remember, *those people* aren't like us, they will steal and cheat their way to the top. They convince people to feel sorry for them to get handouts and legs up. Nobody ever gave me a handout or a leg up. You have to fight to hold on to what you have, understand?'

'We understand, Dad,' they'd said. And Eric did, he really did. He had won that match, he was sure of it. It had been stolen from him, and there was nothing he could do to get it back. Eric never really felt safe again.

And now, Eric was the regional manager of Louey's, a discount everything-under-the-sun store of the big-box variety that had spread throughout the Midwest like a rash, each new location erupting like a sore. He managed thirteen stores across southeast Michigan, nearly nine hundred employees, but was based in Elderpool. Among his legions of employees in the Elderpool store was Brynn's own father, Henry Plover.

There was a *no work talk* policy at family gatherings, something that Eric always made a show of benevolently bestowing upon everyone as if it were a reprieve only he could offer, a presidential pardon. Standing over a browned, glistening turkey, his electric carver poised, he'd say, 'Merry Christmas everyone: eat, drink and be merry! And no work talk!' This uneven power dynamic was an endless source of awkward silences and misdirected temper tantrums. After all, Louey's had put Brynn's family's store, Elderpool Family Grocer, out of business faster than you could say two-for-one on bulk toilet paper, while supplies last.

Henry Plover had only agreed to accept the job managing the deli and butcher department at Louey's after a year spent drinking his savings, losing his driver's license and almost burning down the house Brynn had grown up in while attempting to make a bonfire in the front yard with what was left of the Elderpool Family Grocer's brown paper grocery bags.

Brynn and Eric had only just met. She was waiting tables at Buster's Bar & Grill on Main Street, which Eric and some work

friends frequented for happy hour. Eric didn't enjoy flirting, didn't quite know how to do it; when he tried, it always seemed to come out as teasing, mocking, vaguely aggressive. He had the confidence of a man who'd been told he was handsome his entire life, who'd played sports in high school and college, and who went to the gym before work every morning – but lacked the laid-back nature, the comfort with the possibility of rejection, required to flirt easily and naturally. Still, they'd struck up a rapport one evening when Brynn was let off early on a particularly slow shift and Eric invited her to join his group.

'I'm not allowed to be a customer here in my work uniform,' she'd told him. Flashing his signature *problem solved* smile, he pointed his index finger at the sky as if receiving a message from God, commanded her to 'wait right here, fifteen minutes,' and promptly ran out the door. Remembering it now, he recalls how he'd been suddenly gripped by the plan, as if he'd been following a set of predetermined actions, which had been programmed *for* him, but not *by* him. Eric had been launched into action by Brynn's words. He was almost giddy as he ran out the door, jumped into his car and raced across town.

Exactly fifteen minutes later he returned, a Louey's bag in his hand, and said, breathless, 'Wasn't sure what you'd like, hope they're your size.' Brynn took the bag to the ladies' room, leaving him to imagine how she'd react when she discovered three different tops, all petite. Minutes later, she joined Eric and his friends wearing a simple black V-neck cotton blouse with three-quarter sleeves, her work polo peeking out of her purse. The other options he'd supplied her had been a tie-dye tank top with a yin-yang symbol printed on it and a sleeveless turtleneck number with a hole cut out of the back and some ornamental zippers.

'I'm glad you chose that one,' he'd said.

'Was it a test?' she'd asked.

'Of course not,' he'd lied. It was the most thought he'd ever put into selecting a gift for Brynn, then or since.

Brynn took to bringing a change of clothes on Tuesday nights so that she could join Eric and his friends for a few drinks after her shift. Inevitably, his friends would fall away and they would tuck themselves into a quiet booth and talk. Being ten years older than her – which he liked in a way he couldn't articulate – he got the impression

that Brynn felt elevated by his interest in her, and he liked how that made him feel. She made him feel like he was winning at some unacknowledged but very real game – the testosterone Olympics. Often, when he and Brynn were together, he imagined his childhood wrestling heroes observing him approvingly.

She told him she was taking a few business classes part-time at Elderpool Community College, and about some vague plan she had to start her own company someday – doing or selling what, she'd yet to determine. She had a lot of blind spots when it came to how the world worked, and seemed to absorb his worldview eagerly, hungrily.

When he wasn't talking to her about the virtues of trickle-down economics, he shared his own professional ambitions (to progress from regional GM to CFO of the entire North American operation), his biggest dream (the American one, of course), and an embarrassing story – the one about the time in high school where he went an entire day with a pair of his own sister's underwear fused by static electricity to the back of his jeans – to show her that he knew how to make fun of himself.

He told her about his first girlfriend back at college in Ohio, who'd gone by the name Indigo and had spoken openly about her periods and would say 'goddess bless you' whenever he sneezed. She was a Gender Studies major and inserted words like *hegemony* and *patriarchal paradigm* into every conversation. He'd found her fascinating in a circus-freak kind of way, and she fit right into the brief flicker of experimentation that had passed for Eric's rebellious phase. He had delighted in the juxtaposition of his sweater vest next to her tie-dye; her *Phish* vinyl to his *Eagles Greatest Hits* CD; her cheap joints to his tumblers of Scotch. He'd ended it abruptly and unequivocally when, one warm summer post-coital night, Indigo said offhandedly: 'The universe is just one, expanding, infinite womb, if you think about it; everything is just birth birth birth all the time. Do you think we should have a baby?' As far as Eric knew, Brynn wasn't a nature girl; she never spoke of anything expansive or infinite, and that was just fine by him.

He told her more about himself than she divulged about her own life but it never occurred to him to ask her for more. It was as though her face – that beautiful face, quiet, passive, open – had cast a spell

over him. What blank spaces he perceived in her he simply filled in himself, and she somehow always seemed to reflect his projections.

Brynn and Eric's first kiss was a spontaneous smacker after Brynn hit a bullseye in a game of darts. She'd raised her two fists in the sky in tipsy triumph and before she knew it, Eric had his big hands on each of her cheeks and planted one on her in front of all his friends. Eric liked that she'd seemed thrilled and embarrassed, tucking her unruly hair behind her ears. Her demure shyness made him feel confident and focused. *I'm gonna need some more of that*, he'd told her.

Eventually Brynn told Eric about how much her parents – her father especially – were struggling after they'd shuttered the store. High on the feeling of being the Big Man in Brynn's world, Eric offered Henry a job the following week, who accepted upon threat of divorce by Dana. One day later, Eric proposed to Brynn. He had never asked Brynn if she wanted to get married and have a family someday; it had simply never occurred to him that there might be women who didn't want to be wives and mothers. Not normal, healthy women, anyway. Just like he didn't believe that there were men – normal, healthy ones – who didn't want to be husbands and fathers.

They hadn't even slept together yet, which had been Eric's design. Sitting across from each other over breakfast at the Waffle House, he'd explained to her that he wasn't *christian* Christian, nor was he *conservative* Conservative, and that he certainly wasn't a virgin, God, no! But that as soon as he'd decided that she was the one, he felt like it was important to wait. 'I want the first time we make love to be as husband and wife,' he'd told her. When, holding one of her small hands in both of his like a palm reader, he asked her if she'd had a lot of . . . you know, experience, she'd responded that she wasn't a *virgin* virgin, and though Eric didn't really know what she meant by that, he'd decided it was good enough for him. After all, Jesus had siblings, so even *the* virgin wasn't a virgin virgin. They were married three months later. After the ceremony, Brynn's parents had shaken Eric's hand like a pair of wax figures. They'd treated him with a polite resentment ever since, sitting right on the edge of their chairs when

they visited, their backs straight and stiff, as if they were testifying before Congress, offering humiliating testimony, rather than having Christmas dinner.

So different from his own family, who had flown in for the wedding en masse from Akron, taking up an entire Jet Blue plane. With his parents and brothers and sister at the helm, his extended family on both sides had descended on Elderpool in a flurry of football jerseys and streaky highlights and firm, grain-fed handshakes. They were over the moon for him and Brynn. His mother and sister and aunts and girl cousins had gone out of their way to pull her into the bear hug that was the Mitchell family, to offer her advice about how to take care of him. His mother had even gone to the trouble of typing up the recipes for all his favorite meals and binding them in a little book on which she'd printed: *The Eric Mitchell Handbook*. In the days leading up to the wedding, while the women did women things, the Mitchell men had him hoisted on their proverbial shoulders. During the wedding reception, they hoisted him onto their literal ones. After the wedding, Brynn had said, 'Wow, your family is a little . . . *overwhelming*,' and Eric had been genuinely shocked.

Driving home now, an hour late, Eric found himself wondering when Brynn had begun to feel so alien to him. When she'd stopped trying so hard to please him. In the three days since Jenny's party, Brynn had been acting very strange. He had gone out of his way to be the best version of himself that day – useful and affable, affectionate and funny. Sure, he'd been trying to cajole her into having another baby, but did his intentions matter as long as Brynn was happy? When Lisa had, predictably, drunk too much and made a fool of herself, he'd offered to drive her home, and hadn't prodded Brynn about what had upset her so much. He was sure it was just some silly womanly thing. If he had to guess, maybe Lisa had said something unflattering about Brynn's outfit or something. What *did* women fight about? But three days later, Brynn was vaguer and more distracted than ever, staring off into space when she should be focused on him, listening to whatever it was he had to say. At least he was trying to make conversation! He

knew he shouldn't, but he couldn't help redirecting the shame he felt about his own behavior onto Brynn. If she would only pay him more attention, if she would only try harder to be what he wanted her to be, to be who he had been so sure she was when they'd met, he wouldn't have had to lie about staying late at work to do reports.

Now, as he turned right onto Matador Street, he could just make out his house through the snow at the top of the serpentine incline, looming. His house was both entrance and exit, beginning and end. For others in their neighborhood, it was a landmark in directions given to pizza delivery guys and out-of-town visitors, an indication that they'd gone too far. *If you get to the green brick house at the end of the cul-de-sac, turn around, you've missed us.* He slowed to a crawling ten miles per hour, savoring these last minutes alone in his warm truck, listening to the growl and fury of Rush Limbaugh . . . *Feminism was established so as to allow unattractive women easier access to the mainstream of society* . . . before he crossed the threshold into daddy-and-husband land. Not that he didn't love that land. Mostly. Maybe. '*Ahhhhh!*' he said aloud, and gripped the steering wheel with determination, his knuckles whitening. Of course he loved it, he told himself, *of course of course of course.*

But then why had he done it again? And with Carmen from Homewares of all women! So much less attractive than his wife. Weren't men supposed to cheat with women who were hotter than their wives? Wasn't that the whole point? Women whose bodies hadn't borne your child? Whose breasts were still playthings, not food sources? Women whose names, after a few too many beers with the boys after work, you might actually let slip? Might brag *just* a little about? Just to see their faces light up with jealousy and disbelief? But Carmen had a kid Jenny's age – they went to the same preschool. And unlike Brynn, who had counted calories and did pilates on the living room floor before Jenny woke up, Carmen still looked like she could be four months pregnant, four years later. There was no department in which Carmen was superior to Brynn – trust him, he'd done the calculations – except for one: Carmen worshiped him. Brynn, lately, seemed to tolerate him. Worship, he'd discovered, was a turn-on.

Reaching across, he opened the glove compartment and pulled out the bottle of cologne he kept there for just this reason. No matter how

many times he'd told Carmen not to wear perfume on the days they planned their *lunch breaks* in his office, under the cover story – should anyone ask – that she was clocking up some overtime assisting him with vague spreadsheets and purchase orders, she always arrived reeking of some sickly sweet scent, more like a cheap air freshener than a perfume. Nothing that Brynn would ever wear. He doused himself with the cologne Brynn had bought him for their last anniversary. It was expensive, which was supposed to make up for the fact that it wasn't the world's most thoughtful gift. No matter that Brynn didn't work, so technically he'd bought it for himself. *Comes in handy now, though*, he thought. Not that he anticipated Brynn getting close enough to detect any foreign scents, any Eau de Carmen, but it wasn't worth taking the chance. Especially since he'd told Carmen that tonight was the last time. *Really*. This time, he meant it.

Crawling ever closer toward home, he could envision how the evening would play out, the way that every evening played out. Like clockwork, Eric would pull into the driveway and wave up at his daughter's face, her nose pressed comically against the window, her two palms steadying her tiny body as she awaited Daddy's Grand Homecoming each and every night without fail. God, he loved his daughter. He'd never felt so accepted in his entire life until he'd been the recipient of her devotion, her unquestioning adoration, and the moment her blurry little face called out to him he was instantly filled with a kind of relief, as if he were being invited back into his own home, forgiven for all his sins.

'Daddy! Daddy's home!' Jenny would squeal as he stood on top of the plastic mat in the foyer, stomping muddy slush from his shoes and hanging his coat, which would already have begun to drip with melting snow. Jenny would wrap herself around his leg and sit on his foot as if clinging for dear life, while Eric pretended not to know where she was, walking deeper into the house toward the kitchen.

'Jenny!' he'd call, 'Jenny, where are you? Jennifer Mitchell? I'm home!'

'I'm right here, Daddy!' She'd barely get the words out for laughter.

'Jenny! Come out now, I've got a treat for you!' At which point she would unwrap herself and jump up and down in front of him, 'I'm

here! I'm here!' and he would pick her up and retrieve a watermelon Dum Dum from his pocket, her *flavlorite favor*, the stick slightly bent, and put it solemnly in the palm of her hand, folding her fingers over it like an amulet.

'Not until after dinner,' Brynn always said sternly, addressing Jenny while greeting her husband with an efficient peck on the cheek, a kitchen towel over her shoulder. Would a shadow of suspicion pass over her face? If it did, she'd deflect it. Instead, she'd say, 'Your dinner's warm in the oven.' And then they'd follow the deeply worn grooves of their routine, and Brynn would return to the kitchen, Jenny to the cartoons on the television, and Eric would go to the bedroom and take a very hot, very soapy shower, and all traces of Carmen would disappear down the drain.

Maybe tonight he would break their routine. Maybe he would ask Brynn to join him in the shower. Should he? Was it wrong to initiate sex with his wife less than an hour after he'd slept with Carmen? Unbidden, he imagined Brynn and Carmen both in the shower with him, and felt himself start to grow hard. *Fuck*, he thought. He couldn't walk into the house with an erection. He took a hard left onto Milk Thistle Lane, detouring long enough to let his body disconnect from his brain, buying himself at least five minutes more. He changed the dial and tuned in to the Christian radio station. He looked at his wedding ring, and felt himself go soft again.

Four minutes.

Maybe tonight, Brynn would surprise him. Maybe, after he'd eaten the dinner she'd kept warm for him and after Jenny had fallen asleep, she'd pour herself a glass of chardonnay and sit down on the couch next to him and spark an interesting conversation with him, ask him his opinion on the many articles he sent her through the day – usually links to Fox News segments and articles from the *Drudge Report* concerned with the insidious ways the left-wing agenda was worming its way into the school system, and the righteous way conservative mothers were pushing back. And her interest in him, her focused concentration, would turn him on. And then his wife would be enough, and he wouldn't need Carmen.

He doubted it, though. It had been so long since she'd shown any interest in anything beyond Jenny and their home.

Three minutes.

Still, he loved her. He knew he did. He *would* try harder this time, dammit, he'd lighten up, go easier on her. He reminded himself of what he loved about her.

Two minutes.

She volunteered one day a week at Jenny's preschool, sat by his side at Elderpool Evangelical Church every Sunday even though he knew she was ambivalent about the Man Upstairs, always remembered their anniversary and the birthdays of all his family members – *Your mom's birthday card is on the counter, honey, just sign it and I'll pop in in the mail*. When he said he didn't want Jenny wearing makeup and dressing up like a little slut, she'd agreed, and told him it was good that he cared.

One minute.

And she looked good on his arm, there was that. He knew how good-looking she was by the hungry way the other dads in their living room had looked at her at Jenny's birthday party, eyeing her over their beers, and the *lucky bastard* way they looked at him after he casually patted her backside. He loved that. And he supposed that's what he was, at the end of the day, just a lucky bastard.

Home, and he'd managed to talk himself into being happy to be there.

But as he stepped out of his warm car and into the freezing air, something caught his attention. Or rather, the lack of something. Of some*one*. Jenny was not at the window waiting for him.

Part Two

Chapter Four

The first sensation that Brynn registered in her body was that her feet were cold. *Yes, that's right, I have feet*, she thought as she wiggled her toes. That she was in a hospital was obvious from the monitors and machines connected to her body, and the narrow bed she lay in, rails up alongside her. And she could tell that it was night – or perhaps early morning – by the starless, indigo sky she glimpsed through the window.

Her mind quickly leafed through a flipbook of memories; Ginger in the backyard, slipping on the stairs, falling for a thousand years. She registered that she must have been badly hurt, to be here in the hospital. Her cold feet assured her she has not been paralyzed. Had she been here hours or weeks, maybe years? That she was surfacing, reemerging back into her real life, was painfully clear to her. *No*, she thought, *I want to go back*. She closed her eyes and tried to will herself back to wherever she'd been, but she could not conjure it. A deep sorrow cut through her then as she knew that she'd been cast out, exiled. Her grief was immediately chased by the knowledge that nobody would understand what she had experienced. Because how could she be expected to explain where she'd been, what she'd seen?

It was, she thought, like the Universe Game but in reverse; rather than beginning within the soft shell of her own body and expanding out toward the Milky Way, in her coma *she* had been the universe, and everything emanated from her.

If she had to describe it further, she would say it was like she was standing on the edge of a field, and the field was like a screen that was somehow connected to her thoughts. If, say, she thought of a green meadow and wildflowers – *boom!* The field was a green meadow with wildflowers. If she thought of a glittering desert, it was a glittering desert. Rippleless sea? Rippleless sea. Undulating prairie? Undulating

prairie. There was no wrong thought. There was no *wrong* inside of her. Only freedom, only invitation, only the thrumming insistence of now.

And in this beautiful Field of Now, Brynn could alter the landscape within her as easily as she could alter the landscape before her. Like sliding into a warm bath, she slid into a version of herself that had left Michigan and moved to California to study French Cinema.

A version of herself that was the frontwoman of a punk band, covered in tattoos.

A pious, contemplative version who was soothed by the notion of a benevolent God.

A painter Brynn, whose searching, searing, confronting works hung in her own gallery in Berlin, where buyers stood in awe, discussing her *Kunstwollen* and *Einfühlung* in hushed tones.

One who traveled the world working for a development agency feeding the hungry, living her life out of canvas tents and army-issue backpacks.

A lesbian Brynn, shunning the company of men.

A political Brynn, comfortable behind a microphone and on a podium and under an explosion of confetti.

A murderous Brynn.

A celebrity Brynn.

The Brynn who should have been a boy.

Scientist, astronaut, chef.

Beekeeper, brain surgeon, clown.

Marathon runner, writer, farmer.

Philanthropist, priestess, drifter.

A version of herself who was Freya Thomas' mother, daughter, twin or lover.

A Brynn who lived somewhere off the grid, self-sufficient and self-possessed, who enjoyed bracing, cold-water swims and needed no one and never shaved a hair off her body.

A monstrous, insectile Brynn with venomous fangs.

A giant, mythical Brynn who would trample Elderpool underfoot without a passing thought, chanting *Fee-fi-fo-fum.*

None of these Brynns was better or worse than the Brynn who had been lying in a hospital bed, deep in a coma, flickering between

worlds. That Brynn, the mother-wife-daughter Brynn, she understood in the Field of Now, was just one skin of many.

One of her monitors must have sent a signal to someone that she was awake, because two nurses burst into her room in a flurry of pastel-green scrubs. 'Mrs. Mitchell,' one of them said as she pushed various buttons and checked various levels, 'you're awake!' The other nurse was speaking into the handset of a phone mounted to the wall, 'Paging Dr. Reyes, paging Dr. Reyes.' Something about the way the nurses spoke felt peculiar to her ears; their words, their meaning, seemed to take a beat too long to land in her consciousness, and she became agitated, annoyed by the sensors and monitors connected to her body, by the catheter and the IV nutrient drip, the incessant humming and beeping. She was in this agitated state when a handsome, gray-haired man who reminded her of Desi Arnaz entered the room and introduced himself as her doctor, Alfredo Reyes. His words, too, felt somehow distant, unfamiliar.

'Jenny?' She finally managed to speak, the syllables dragging like gravel across her dry throat.

'Jenny is wonderful,' Dr. Reyes said. 'We've all become quite fond of her.'

'Ginger?'

'Ah! Your dog, the superhero! Yes, she is also wonderful.'

Still, his words seemed to be traveling to her from far away, like a staticky radio signal she was struggling to pick up. Was something wrong with her hearing? But she needed to know what had happened to her, how long she'd been here, so she asked, '*Qu'est-ce qu'il m'est arrivé?*' And then her hand flew to her mouth as her eyes widened. *What had she just said?* Dr. Reyes looked at her with gentle inquisitiveness. She tried again, '*Que m'est il arrivé?*'

'French?' he asked, a smile in his eyes.

She nodded yes. She didn't know why, or how, but she knew the answer to his question was yes. '*Oui, merci*,' she said. And once again her eyes went wide and her hand flew to her mouth, as if it might catch the curious butterflies that were flying out of her, examine them, and

then set them free.

'My French is not very good,' he said before slowly, in broken French, explaining that she was in the neurosurgery unit at Elderpool General. She had suffered a serious brain injury, and she'd had to have emergency brain surgery to relieve swelling. She'd been in an induced coma for six weeks. It had been touch and go for some time. She'd missed Christmas and New Year. It was 2013! They were planning to try to bring her out of the coma in four more days, but she decided to come back early. *Welcome!* Luckily, no permanent damage was done to her spinal cord and she was expected to make a full recovery, mobility wise. But, it seemed, she must have sustained damage to the portion of her brain which governed language; he would have to run some tests, but it seemed as if she had what was commonly referred to as Foreign Language Syndrome, but medically referred to as bilingual aphasia.

'Don't worry,' he'd said – *T'inquiète pas* – 'it won't last. You'll be back to English in no time. My advice: enjoy it!' She was aware that, even in his error-ridden French, his words had come through with ringing clarity.

'*Bon*,' she said. And then they'd smiled at each other. Brynn sensed that she was medically exciting to Dr. Reyes, and that he was delighted at the prospect of her – what had he called it? – Foreign Language Syndrome? For her part, she'd been astonished. And then amused. And then wildly, unnervingly happy, and immediately understood it for what it was: a token – a *souvenir* – from the Field of Now. She had slipped into a new skin after all. *Merci*, she said inwardly, *merci, merci, merci*. It was only after she had allowed herself a long moment to bask in the warm, golden glow of this remnant of her time out of time that she thought to ask, '*Et* Eric?'

Eric and Jenny had visited Brynn in the hospital a few hours after she woke up, but when Brynn's first words upon seeing her daughter's wide-eyed face had been *Salut, bébé* – and then, to Eric: *Bonjour, chérie* – she couldn't pretend she didn't see them recoil, Eric in disgust, Jenny in confusion. Her parents – *Salut, Maman, Papa* –

hadn't reacted much better. They'd stood like vampires at her hospital room door, requiring a proper English invitation before they could enter. It never came.

Brynn quickly discovered that she could still speak English, but it was effortful, required mental translation, and was heavily accented. Dr. Reyes had joined them in her room, lollipops in his coat pocket for Jenny, and explained Brynn's condition. Eric scowled and stared at the floor, and had no questions beyond how long it would last; a question for which Dr. Reyes had no answer. She couldn't tell what annoyed Eric more: the French, or the French-accented English.

The next day, she was greeted by a very bubbly and overly caffeinated physical therapist, Valerie. '*Bonjour!*' Valerie said, her enthusiasm making up for her comical butchering of the word: *Banjur!* 'We are all so excited about you!' Valerie said, rubbing her hands together in a *let's get to work* fashion.

One of her first exercises with Valerie was to walk to the small bathroom and manage her own needs, a prerequisite for going home. She took small, careful steps in her sock feet, Valerie's hand on her elbow: and there she was in the mirror. It was the first time she'd seen herself in just over six weeks, and what she saw alarmed her. '*Mon Dieu*,' she whispered as she took in her shorn head. Gone were her magnificent auburn curls, and the new growth coming through seemed lackluster and wiry. She traced the long arc of the scar – still raised and hot pink – which ran along the right side of her head. She'd lost weight, and looked gaunt. But the more she looked at herself, the more she saw something else shimmering behind her injuries. Something stalwart and brave, steady and immovable, seemed to glow from within her. *It's me*, she thought – because she recognized someone in that glow, someone she hadn't seen for years. It was the Brynn from before *The Song*. The Brynn she'd been before she made herself small. The Brynn who still believed that she might have a purpose in this life. ''Allo,' she said to the mirror, and winked.

One of the first questions Dr. Reyes had asked was whether or not she'd ever formally learned French, or visited France, or been

otherwise influenced by French in any way. The answer was *non*, she'd never left Michigan, let alone been to France – but the question transported her back to what had been her refuge in high school: Madame O'Flanagan's French class.

The classroom of Mrs. Margaret O'Flanagan had been plastered with images of the Louvre, the Champs-Elysées and the Eiffel Tower, and the narrow strips between the large shatterproof windows were fitted with Monet and Rodin prints. Photographs of bucolic country farmhouses and Mediterranean coastlines had been carefully torn from old *Visite La France!* calendars and tacked on every available space, *Avril* and *Novembre* printed across their borders. Brynn could just make out the raised handwriting of birthdays and doctor's appointments that Madame O'Flanagan had written into the squares on the other side in her perfect, old-world cursive. The back of the door was blacked out with a collage of *Les Misérables* playbill covers. A poorly framed poster of two stylish women sipping dainty espressos and smoking cigarettes on a sidewalk café underneath a red and white–striped awning, a mime in a beret in the background making a *who, me?* gesture, hung crookedly behind Madame O'Flanagan's desk. Madame's classroom had been Brynn's church, and Madame O'Flanagan its magical priestess.

Brynn had been in Advanced Placement French with a small cadre of overachievers. But unlike the rest of them, who were in AP Everything, this was the only place Brynn excelled academically. Emboldened by her capacity for French, she took one semester of German, but quickly found Herr Pratt to be lackluster and boring, his classroom sterile and uninspiring, so she didn't continue.

Madame O'Flanagan's classroom had been the only place the Kyles of her world couldn't follow and taunt her with *The Song*. On Fridays, Madame O'Flanagan brought warm baguettes and camembert for the AP students, and they held what she referred to as a *salon* – which pretty much meant that they just talked about anything as long as it was in French. Sometimes they'd watch French films – *La Reine Margot*, *Indochine*, the Three Colors trilogy – which had nudity and sex. Madame making a point of not mentioning it, thereby sending the message that she expected them to be mature enough to handle it. Many times she'd come close to telling Madame O'Flanagan about

The Song, about how she had thought she was in control of her body, of her sexuality, like Juliette Binoche and Isabelle Adjani – but she had been wrong, naïve, she'd put herself in danger and she was full of shame. Though she never did; she was too scared that perhaps Madame O'Flanagan would judge her, too.

Brynn had been surprised by her aptitude for French. She found it so easy, all the conjugating and accent marks, the weekly vocabulary lists; it had all soaked into her brain so effortlessly, the way song lyrics did. Mostly, though, she loved Madame O'Flanagan and her purposefully unkempt hair, pencils and hairpins poking out here and there like some kind of bird's nest, and the way she said, *Bon, alors*, even when she was speaking English, as if it had just become a part of her. As if languages could do that.

Dr. Reyes explained to Brynn that our brains are far more sophisticated than we can fathom, and that even if her conscious mind hadn't become a fluent French speaker, her unconscious mind would have stored everything away, every French film they'd watched or *chanson* they'd sung along with, every time Madame O'Flanagan had made them watch the news on France 24, quizzing them on their aptitude – Brynn's brain had been recording, keeping it all for a rainy day.

'Is this my rainy day?' Brynn asked him.

'My dear,' Dr. Reyes said, 'it is a magnificent downpour. I highly recommend you splash in the puddles!'

Lisa came on the third day of Brynn's awakening. Brynn had been half-heartedly watching a rerun of *Antiques Roadshow* on the small television when Lisa strode in, peeking from behind a large bouquet of garishly dyed grocery store flowers. Brynn could detect Lisa's jumpiness in the way her eyes darted around the room like a spooked horse.

'Um, *bonjour*?' Lisa ventured, unsure of whether she should sit down or remain standing. 'Your mom told me about your, um, brain. That you're speaking French.'

'*Oui, oui*,' Brynn said from where she was propped up in her bed

and gestured toward the chair next to her, 'but I can speak English, too.'

'Sorry I couldn't get here sooner,' Lisa said as she sat down in a chair next to Brynn's bed, laying the flowers on the tray table, 'I just worked two doubles in a row.' She was fidgeting with the hem of her cardigan, her hands betraying her discomfort, before she clasped them together tightly as if in prayer. Brynn regarded her. Lisa's hair was starting to grow back and it was at a kind of seventies shag phase which Lisa seemed to be attempting to manage with an unstylish, puffy headband. She was in her work uniform and had dark circles under her eyes. Had she been terribly worried about me? Brynn wondered.

As if responding to Brynn's unspoken question, Lisa blurted out, 'This was all my fault, Brynnie,' and her eyes filled with tears. Brynn knew exactly what Lisa was talking about, she remembered everything, but that didn't stop her from asking, 'Why would you think that?'

'*The Song*, Brynn.' Lisa's features pinched toward the center of her face as she cringed. 'I cannot believe I sang that. *Did* that. I'm so sorry. I feel like if I hadn't . . . sung that to you, I don't know . . . I just feel like somehow this wouldn't have happened.'

'*Tout va bien*,' Brynn said, and then, in English, 'I forgive you.'

But Brynn knew that this was perhaps her first lie since waking up, or at least it was her first gross oversimplification. Because what she meant was that, when she recalled *The Song*, in all its many iterations, her mind could no longer adhere to the shame it had once elicited. And when she looked at Lisa, her face swollen from crying and fatigue, her eyes pleading for forgiveness, she found she could no longer relate to the sense of envy and competition that had permeated their friendship for so long. She and Lisa had, she realized, lost their connective tissue. In fact, she felt almost nothing for Lisa anymore, save for perhaps an echo of duty, of habit. To tell Lisa she forgave her seemed kinder than trying to explain all of these revelations. But she wondered now if perhaps Lisa had picked up on something, because she had rarely visited her after that first time.

Eric and Jenny came to see her every day. Eric remained stoic, suspicious. His distaste for the words she spoke seemed to deepen every time he saw her. When they arrived, he'd walk into Brynn's

room slowly, trepidatiously, with a childlike look of anticipation on his face – would this be the day she was normal again? But each day she'd greet them with an *'Allo!* and he'd say, 'Oh, you're still doing it,' and shake his head with disappointment. It didn't seem to matter to him that she had no control over it; if anything, her lack of control seemed to only add to his irritation.

After her initial shock, Jenny didn't seem to care about the sounds that came out of Brynn's mouth. In fact, after just a few days of visiting Brynn, Jenny had picked up a few French words, and when Brynn would say *bisous* at the end of their visit, Jenny would pepper her face with kisses, saying *beezoo-beezoo-beezoo*, which conjured an image of a zoo entirely inhabited by bees and made both of them laugh.

'Even your laugh sounds different,' Eric said, sulking in an uncomfortable chair in the corner, his arms crossed protectively over his chest, as if French were contagious.

A week later, after her doctors and physical therapists were satisfied with her progress, Brynn was given the all-clear to go home. When Dr. Reyes and Valerie told her and Eric the news, Eric panicked. 'But, but,' he stammered, 'what am I supposed to *do* with her?' Brynn had not been able to stop herself from laughing, and even Dr. Reyes seemed amused when he answered, 'You don't have to *do* anything, Mr. Mitchell. Simply return to your lives.'

The first thing that the French destroyed was The Schedule. When Brynn walked back through the door of 702 Matador Street, she didn't even know what time it was – let alone where in The Schedule she ought to be. She'd been so excited to see Ginger, that the idea of lassoing Jenny and herself back into their strict regime not only seemed pointless to Brynn, but she quite literally found she didn't have the vocabulary for it. The Schedule had required a punishment–reward approach to her relationship with Jenny. It demanded that she praise

Jenny effusively for even the smallest achievements, and chide her, or withhold prizes, for the smallest infractions. They had been ruled by The Schedule, and Brynn could see now that it had poisoned something between her and her daughter, had made them adversaries. The Schedule didn't allow for complications, and ever since she'd woken up, Brynn saw herself as dazzlingly, deliciously complicated. If she'd been a lightly seasoned, basic roast chicken before, now she was coq au vin.

Processing her world in French changed the way she related to Jenny. As the weeks passed, she no longer felt that she was dragging Jenny along behind her, willing her to keep up lest they fall behind in some unwinnable competition that Brynn now understood had been her own creation; nobody had ever cared about The Schedule but her. Instead, she now perceived them as coexisting side by side. She gave Jenny more space, more freedom, and didn't feel the need to constantly tell her how great she was doing. Instead, she gave her full attention to the things that truly pleased her, and completely ignored what didn't. 'I really like this particular drawing, Jenny,' Brynn might say, her English dripping in French, 'because I like the way you've put these colors next to each other, and the way that you used this funny shape, and the way that this drawing makes me feel kind of sleepy, in a good way.' And of the other drawings that did not elicit any strong feelings in Brynn, she said nothing. A new kind of honesty, an authenticity of being, was forming between them, which made Brynn feel less claustrophobic than she had since Jenny was born.

This didn't mean it was always pleasant, especially for Jenny. But Brynn didn't feel that discomfort was the worst thing that could happen to her child anymore. If anything, she found herself thinking it was fortifying and necessary for Jenny to learn that she was not the center of the universe. These days, Brynn needed more time on her own, more time to dress herself and do her makeup – she was perfecting a razor-sharp cat's eye – or style her hair, which had regained its luster and was long enough for her to mold into an androgynous rockabilly pompadour that she adored and Eric hated. She needed more time to read or to drink her coffee in silence or to walk Ginger alone. More time to daydream, to search her mind for memory fragments from the Field of Now. She found herself telling

Jenny *non* much more frequently. Telling Jenny to leave her be – *laisse-moi tranquille!* – to go and occupy herself, that she would tell her when she was ready to do something together.

Sometimes this upset Jenny a great deal. She'd had more than a few raging tantrums. She'd begun to wet her bed occasionally and to suck her thumb again. When Eric confronted Brynn about these developments, pointing out that Brynn had been home for more than a month, demanding to know when she was going to be *done with all of this*, Brynn was cavalier. She dismissed Jenny's regressions as a temporary response to a big change, a change that would ultimately be beneficial.

'To who?!' Eric roared. 'Who is benefitting from this, Brynn?'

It was only after he'd stormed out of the room that Brynn had said, quietly and privately, '*Moi*.'

Five weeks after she woke up, Brynn sat in front of her laptop waiting for Dr. Reyes to join her for their weekly teleconference to track her progress. Dr. Reyes had asked her permission to write a clinical paper about her bilingual aphasia, and she'd been happy to oblige. As she'd gotten to know Dr. Reyes, he'd struck her as more of a philosopher than a neurosurgeon. But the more she came to understand her own neurological circuits, the more philosophical it seemed to her, too. And with Dr. Reyes, unlike Eric, Brynn didn't have to pretend that she wasn't totally and completely interested in herself, because she was, indeed, *interesting* – for perhaps the first time in her adult life. She didn't have to pretend that she was irritated by the media attention that had turned her into a minor local celebrity, because Dr. Reyes was equally delighted by all of it.

'*Hola*, Señora Mitchell,' Dr. Reyes said energetically as his face appeared on her screen. He had taken to teaching her a little Spanish every time they spoke.

'*Hola*, Dr. Reyes,' she answered, smiling widely.

'Brynn,' he clapped his hands together, 'tell me, how are you doing? And I am sorry to say, if you can please use English? I am afraid my French is still too inferior for important conversations.'

'*Bon, alors*,' Brynn began, and went on to explain that she was still getting headaches, and a bit of vertigo, but that the medication he'd prescribed did seem to be helping with those.

'And emotionally, Brynn?' he asked, and his sincerity made her feel like she was going to cry. Nobody but Dr. Reyes asked her how she was feeling emotionally.

'Well,' she searched for the words, first in French and then English, 'I don't feel anxiety like I used to; I don't feel panic.' And this was true: in the weeks since she'd awoken she hadn't once needed to play the Universe Game. 'But, I am . . . worried.'

Dr. Reyes nodded his head in a manner that said: *continue*. And so she did. She told Dr. Reyes that Eric was unhappy and angry about her speaking French. That he seemed to take it as a personal insult, and that he asked her every day why she hadn't come back to English. She conceded that while she was enjoying Jenny more, she could see that the change in her language was affecting her daughter, too. She was sure that Jenny sensed the tension between her and Eric. Her own parents were keeping their distance, but that was nothing new. And Lisa, who had once occupied such a large part of her life, had retreated. And it wasn't that Brynn felt particularly bothered by the lack of Lisa or her parents – if anything, she felt a kind of relief. But the fact that she knew it was the French that was bothering them upset her. 'Because,' she concluded, 'I feel like this is good for me.'

Dr. Reyes released a long exhale and gave her a reassuring smile while he took his time crafting a response, which came in the form of a question. 'Do you want your speech to go back to normal, Brynn?'

'I – I wish there was a way that I could keep French inside me, or at least, the way it's making me feel, and to speak English in a way that makes everyone more comfortable.'

He considered her answer. His mouth opened to speak and then he closed it again, reconsidering. Finally, he said, 'Charlemagne said that to speak a second language is to possess a second soul. Did you know that?'

'No,' she said, but she was already smiling. She recognized herself in those words immediately.

Dr. Reyes smiled back at her. 'I was twelve when I began learning English,' he said. 'I was so hungry for English, Brynn. For me,

English was a key to the world. And oh my God, how I loved American music back then! The Monkees! The Beach Boys! I wanted to sing these songs in proper English. I was a very good student. I went the total immersion route. Even at home with my family, I tried to only speak English. I stopped watching Spanish television. I stopped listening to Spanish music. It was English, English, English, all the time. It went like this until I moved from Madrid to Boston to begin my medical studies. One night, I was at the university cafeteria with a group of other students I had become somewhat close with. In fact, my current husband was in that group, but of course I didn't know that then. Anyway, they were all American. Native English speakers. We'd just finished a big exam and we all had that feeling of happy exhaustion after you study really hard for something and then it's over – I bet there's a German word for that. Anyway, I remember it was lasagne night at the cafeteria, because that was our favorite. We'd all stuffed ourselves with as much lasagne as we could eat and then, just as I leaned back in my chair to relax and enjoy this sense of happy exhaustion with my friends, they all began to stand up and gather their things. "Guys!" I said. "Where are you going?" Ah, Alfredo, they all said, we're tired. We're going to sleep. And then I said "*Sobremesa!*" – and they all looked at me like I was crazy. Even the ones who spoke a little Spanish didn't know what *sobremesa* meant. There is no English word for it, Brynn. It means the time after a meal with your beloved people when you sit and talk, digest, and enjoy each other's company.'

'*Sobremesa*,' Brynn said softly, liking how the word felt in her mouth.

'And, Brynn, when they all left, when I sat alone, with no *sobremesa*, that's when I felt it. One of my souls was on life support. I had given all my attention to my new English soul, and I had neglected my Spanish one. I have been very careful ever since to keep both of my souls happy.'

He didn't need to say any more. She understood what the gift of his story was: permission to have two souls. She loved Dr. Reyes.

Chapter Five

Eric hated Dr. Reyes. But here he was, six weeks after Brynn woke up from her coma, sitting like a schoolboy in Dr. Reyes' office. The broad mahogany table between them was littered with files and envelopes, X-rays and medical journals. A model of the human brain obscured Dr. Reyes' face as he held it in front of him, spinning it around absent-mindedly like a coach with a football. When he stopped, his long fingers were splayed around a portion of the model that was painted red, tucked underneath the flesh-colored walnut-looking parts that Eric recognized.

Eric's disdain for Dr. Reyes surged. He reminded him of his old wrestling opponent, Javier Lopez, and Eric had the unnerving sense that Dr. Reyes might try to get him in a headlock or pin him down on the ground. Eric wondered if he was as qualified as Brynn's *other* doctors. He noted the framed photograph on the desk, Dr. Reyes and another man kissing under a wedding altar. And while this made Eric deeply uncomfortable, he'd had enough of Brynn. He needed help – even if it was from this homosexual foreigner. He needed someone to make her stop. He'd come here today hoping that Dr. Reyes could prescribe her something or intervene somehow and restore Brynn to who she'd been before her fall.

'This,' Dr. Reyes began, drumming his fingers excitedly, 'is the cerebellum.'

'Okay,' Eric said slowly.

Dr. Reyes cleared his throat. 'It's the portion of your wife's brain that sustained damage.'

'Is she faking it?' Eric cut to the chase.

'How do you mean "faking" it? By all accounts she is speaking fluently, quite beautifully in fact, according to one of the nurses. Of course, she's from Quebec, and says your wife is speaking a more

standard European French, but apparently, it's quite authentic-sounding, accent-wise.'

'No, but, is she . . . I mean,' Eric exhaled loudly, closing his eyes for a long moment, 'is she doing it on purpose? Like, for attention, maybe?' Eric was vexed by the attention Brynn was getting, by the interest the local news continued to show in her, the deference people exuded when they passed her in the street. It made him feel sidelined, emasculated. It made him feel like *he* was the wife.

'*Purpose*, Mr. Mitchell, *intent* – those are rather intangible substances to try to measure. Not my field of expertise. What we do know, indisputably, is that your wife suffered a blow to the back of her head when she slipped down the stairs.' He raised his eyebrows suspiciously at Eric as if to say, *Unless, of course, you pushed her?* 'Do you speak any other languages, Mr. Mitchell?' Dr. Reyes continued.

'No,' Eric said, curling his lip defensively. 'Why would I need to?'

'Why, indeed,' Dr. Reyes said mildly, and Eric didn't understand what he meant by that, or how he was supposed to respond. Eric stood up and began pacing back and forth, indignant and silent. Finally, Dr. Reyes, still holding the model of the brain, said, 'You know the expression, *If you can't beat 'em, join 'em*?'

'Yes.'

'Well, have you considered learning French? This could be a journey for you, Mr. Mitchell. An opportunity to expand your mind.'

Is this guy fucking with me? Eric thought, and felt his fingers ball into fists.

'I don't want to go on a *journey*,' he said slowly, his jaw pulsing. 'I want my family to go back to normal.'

Both men were silent for a few long, uncomfortable seconds before Eric asked, 'Do you believe in God, Dr. Reyes?' He didn't wait for an answer before continuing, 'Because I do. And there is something . . . *demonic* about what is happening to Brynn. You know, when people are possessed, sometimes they speak in other languages.'

Dr. Reyes carefully placed the model brain back onto his desk and regarded Eric seriously. 'Mr. Mitchell,' Dr. Reyes said, his voice firm, 'I can assure you that your wife is not possessed by a demon. She is experiencing a well-documented, although rare, neurological

phenomenon. And, as you must realize, I am a doctor, not a priest. And this is 2013. If you're after an exorcism, you've come to the wrong place.' Dr. Reyes leaned against his desk, took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes.

Who does he think he is? Eric thought, this *doctor* who didn't seem to understand that Eric's world had been turned into a Hitchcockian horror, a hall of mirrors distorting and disfiguring all that he had believed to be fixed and unchangeable. This man with all his questions and framed diplomas, all his authority, talking down to Eric, not understanding that Eric was scared. Why couldn't this doctor tell him how *not* to be scared? He wanted Dr. Reyes to tell him how he was going to fix his wife, but instead the doctor asked, 'Are you familiar with the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, Mr. Mitchell?'

'No,' Eric said, feeling like he might vomit.

'It's a linguistic theory, sometimes referred to as linguistic relativity, that dates back to the nineteenth century. It basically states that the language we speak influences and shapes our very perception of reality.' He paused, scanning Eric's face for a reaction, and finding none, he continued, 'It's a controversial but fascinating proposal. You've heard of the Hopi time controversy? Color perception studies? No? Well, it's worth looking them up, Mr. Mitchell, as I have the sense that your wife may be on the cusp of a shift in perception.'

'How long will . . . her *shift* . . . in *perception* . . . last?' Eric felt desperate.

'Another philosophical query, Mr. Mitchell,' Dr. Reyes began cheerfully. 'One could argue that our perceptions are always shifting' – he noted the anguish in Eric's face, and altered his course – 'but in most cases, like I told you when Brynn was still in the hospital, Foreign Language Syndrome is not permanent. Really, Mr. Mitchell, you should try to delight in it! It's a fleeting wonder. But again, permanence and impermanence,' Dr. Reyes threw his hands up in the air, 'rather thorny topics, are they not?'

Eric lunged for the wastepaper basket and vomited his breakfast – the one he'd had to make for himself, *again*, after his hopes that somehow Brynn would have returned to him *properly* overnight, and made him eggs and bacon, the toast perfectly buttered, the way he liked it, had been dashed, once more.

He still couldn't get that night out of his head. The utter chaos of it. Just thinking about it made his stomach lurch. He had known something was wrong when Jenny's face hadn't been pressed against the window waiting for him. And then her *screaming*: hoarse and pitiful and helpless, kicking him in the gut as soon as he approached the front door, his heart pumping so hard he thought it might literally explode. He fumbled with the doorknob, calling her name. *I'm here, Jenny! I'm here!* When he finally burst in, with Jenny's wails instantly increasing in volume and sharpness, he plowed through the house – through the living room and into the kitchen where he found her in front of the sliding door, pounding her little fists against the glass, her face a maraschino cherry covered in tears and snot. *MOMMY!* she was screaming in between gulps of air, that most heart-wrenching of children's cries, so like drowning. *Ma-UH-ah-UH-meee!* She reached up for him, and when he picked her up he could feel she was soaked through with sweat.

Where was Brynn? He could barely see through the window, the bright light of the kitchen obscuring his view. Ginger was barking from somewhere in the yard. With Jenny still clinging to him, her little hands like claws refusing to let go, he opened the door. He was halfway down the stairs, squinting into the darkness and calling for Ginger before he saw them: Brynn's legs across the bottom stairs, covered in snow, her body splayed at a gruesome angle on the ground, and Ginger lying on her chest, barking, refusing to get up.

The next day, the collagen-lipped local newscaster, Kylie Plymouth, somberly delivered the headline: *An Elderpool mother was saved by the family's golden retriever.* And by all accounts, it was true.

Two hours.

Two whole hours Brynn had lain unconscious at the bottom of the stairs, limbs akimbo, a fallen crucifix, bleeding from her cranium.

Two whole hours Jenny had stood at the door, racked with terror.

Two hours that should have been one, but he had decided to invite Carmen up to his office . . . *fuck!* And really – trust him, he'd done the

calculations – that one hour should have been fifty-five minutes, but because he'd taken a five-minute detour to deal with his goddamn erection, he'd been even later. Left his wife broken in the cold and his daughter terrified and alone for one hour and five minutes longer than he should have. Eric was certain Brynn's accident was punishment for his indiscretions. Imagined God himself watching him discover the gruesome scene, wagging his finger: *This* is what happens when you commit adultery. *This* is what you get.

Two whole hours Ginger the Wonder Dog had kept her vigil. The doctors told Eric that Ginger's body had kept Brynn's vital organs warm, bought her some time, but if Eric hadn't returned home when he did, they could have both died from hypothermia. Everyone at the hospital kept telling him that it could have been worse.

But it *was* worse.

Brynn, his wife, the mother of his child, had to have surgery on her *brain*. Her head was *shaved*. She was in an induced *coma* for six weeks. Christ almighty. Eric felt like he was in some horrible movie. He had the mind-splintering thought that maybe he was the one who'd been in an accident, that he was the one in a coma, and this was his endless nightmare. That was, he knew, exactly what he deserved.

He was informed that there was no predicting the full extent of Brynn's injuries.

Phrases like *vegetative state*, *severe brain damage* and *long-term care* were lobbed at him by men and women in white coats far too casually.

Organ donation was discussed.

Eric wrestled with whether or not he was the kind of man who could change his wife's diapers. He did not think he was, and thus heaved another shortcoming onto the pyre of his self-loathing.

Far-flung family members were called and encouraged to fly to the nearest airport and catch a shuttle straight to Elderpool General.

They were informed that if it came to it, hospice was an option, and handed brochures.

Lisa was an ever-present blur of red eyes and running mascara, offering to stay with him and cook and clean and help with Jenny.

No, thank you, we're fine.

Henry and Dana hovered like ghosts, eyeing him accusingly. Dana

distressingly took to calling Brynn *my baby girl* – something Eric almost found funny, because he knew Brynn would have been shocked, would have made some snide remark about Dana's maternal instincts kicking in far too late. Jenny sat on the hospital floor drawing pictures and placing them solemnly on Brynn's chest, talking to her. 'Here, Mommy,' she would say in her sweet, lilting voice, 'it's for you.' Self-portraits of Jenny with hearts for eyes, drawings of snowmen and birthday cakes, green houses with three stick figures and a yellow dog in the yard were scattered across Brynn's chest like talismans that would summon her back to consciousness.

His own parents had flown in from Ohio and moved into the guest room where he could hear his mother's muffled phone calls as she updated friends and family . . . *not looking great, all we can do is pray* . . .

And then, with no fanfare or warning, Brynn woke up.

The relief he felt when he heard that she was okay, that she had somehow made it to the other side, was short-lived. 'Mr. Mitchell,' Dr. Reyes had said to him over the phone when he'd called to tell him the good news, 'I must prepare you. Your wife is speaking French.' Eric had tried to focus on the fact that she was alive, awake, and speaking – even if she wasn't speaking the way he wanted her to. Dr. Reyes wanted him to believe that this wouldn't last forever, and that what was happening was a kind of miracle, something to be excited about. He wanted Eric to believe that Brynn was still the woman he married – just a more special version of herself. As if this curse were an upgrade! Ha! He didn't know how to explain to Dr. Reyes that the changes he perceived in her were dark and full of guile. The French was twisting her into something altogether new. He did not want new. And he couldn't shake the feeling that a bomb was about to detonate inside his home.

Chapter Six

Lisa had sprung into action the moment Eric called her from his car with a wailing Jenny in the back seat. He told her he was following an ambulance that carried an unconscious, nearly frozen Brynn. Lisa was worried for Brynn, worried for Jenny and Ginger. But what had really activated her was Eric. Eric needed her, was desperate for her help. She'd probably been the first person he called, after 911. Following his instructions, she drove as fast as she could to the Matador Street house, where she found Ginger in her doggie bed wrapped in quilts. Amazing that Eric had thought to do that before he left, with everything else going on. What a loving, sensitive thing to do. It was the kind of thing she'd do. They were so similar, she and Eric. She slowly guided the dog to her car, helping her into the back seat and turning the heat on full blast until Ginger began to pant. She spoke to her all the way to the vet, rhetorically and pryingly. *Did Eric wrap you all up in blankies before he left? Is he a good, good doggie daddy? He's a good, good doggie daddy, isn't he, girl, isn't he, Ginger? Who's a good girl?*

She wasn't proud of it, but she couldn't help but feel like it was Brynn's carelessness about Eric, her lack of gratitude for all she had, that had put her in harm's way. The newsletters and blogs tell her she must always have an attitude of gratitude if she wants good things to happen for her. Wasn't the inverse also true? Could Brynn's lack of gratitude have caused her to fall? But the moment this thought formed in her mind, Lisa remembered what she herself had done, what she had sung, the awful things she'd said. Perhaps it wasn't Brynn who was being taught a lesson, but Lisa herself? Had Lisa wished for something bad to happen to Brynn? Was this a *be careful what you wish for* moment? Had she brought the sky crashing down on them all?

For the first two weeks, when she wasn't working, Lisa sat by Brynn's bedside, holding her limp, clammy hand. She clipped her

toenails. Mirthfully plucked a chin hair. Applied lip balm. With each moment she spent in service to Brynn's body, she hoped she was atoning for what she'd done, that some force was keeping track, and that when she'd done enough, Brynn would wake up. But this wasn't her only motivation. She timed her visits to coincide with Eric's. All of her ministrations took place in Eric's presence, always in the hope of eliciting the words: *Thank you, Lisa, I don't know what we'd do without you.* But he never said them. He merely nodded at her as if she'd simply done her duty. And wasn't it her duty? Wasn't that her best friend lying there in a hospital bed, in a coma, with a severe brain injury, who might die and leave behind a little girl and a perfect husband? Yes, it was. She would do her duty.

And she *did* care. She *was* worried. 'We had a little fight and hadn't been able to make up before this horrible, terrible accident,' she told the nurses. 'We both said some mean things to each other.' She couldn't help but try to spread the fault evenly between her and Brynn, like they'd split every treat they'd shared as children. And even if Brynn hadn't technically said anything mean to Lisa, she had said plenty of mean things about Eric, which had upset Lisa. 'But we're like sisters, you know? I don't know if I can ever forgive myself if she doesn't know how sorry I am.' The nurses shared their never-ending supply of fresh pastries and boxes of diabetic chocolates with her, told her that she should talk to Brynn, tell her how she felt, get it all out. They told her that it might help, you never knew. 'Yes, I will, thank you,' she told them, wrapping a chocolate-glazed donut in a napkin for later, but she never did.

Four weeks into Brynn's coma, Elderpool had been blanketed in fresh, twinkling white snow that sparkled under the municipal Christmas lights strung between every available tree and lamppost, and settled on the heavy pine wreaths festooned with ornaments that hung precariously from every streetlight. The effect was that the entire town looked like it had been encased in a snow globe, replete with ruddy-cheeked shoppers and carefree ice-skaters gliding across the outdoor rink. Everything smelled like pumpkin spice and maple syrup.

Christmas music blared from the cafés and bank branches, the post office and Louey's store, and, much to Lisa's irritation, the lobby of the hotel where Lisa sat at the front desk, sucking on a mini candy cane and waiting for Eric to respond to her text message.

Christmas was in four days and Brynn was showing no signs of improvement. Wouldn't the right thing to do be for Lisa to ensure that Eric and Jenny had a normal Christmas? Well, as normal as possible? Minutes earlier, she'd texted Eric: *Hey, just an idea, should I do some Christmas shopping for Jenny? I know you don't have time. And if you want, I can put up your Christmas tree, and if you don't have plans on Christmas, I'm happy to cook and try to give Jenny the Christmas Brynn usually would. What do you think?*

Lisa knew Eric's parents had flown back home to Ohio the day before. Lisa also knew that Eric was at the hospital, as she'd called the nurse on duty, Eileen, who she'd made a point of becoming friendly with. *I just want to make sure she's not alone*, Lisa had told Eileen, who'd reported that the 'lovely Mr. Mitchell' was at Brynn's bedside that very moment. Lisa knew Eric had his phone on him. And it wasn't like he was in the throes of some deep conversation with Brynn. Surely he'd seen the message . . . so why no response? Was he overcome by the selfless thoughtfulness of her offer? Bowled over by her generosity?

She stared at her phone. Three little dots appeared, indicating that a response was, finally, imminent. But then they went away. *What the fuck?* And then they reappeared. They did this a few more times as Lisa's heart palpitated anxiously. He must be writing a long message, Lisa reasoned, excited about the idea of finally, *finally* getting the gratitude she wanted. Or, if she was honest, finally getting Eric to depend on her, to allow her to do more, to get closer . . .

A message appeared: *That's ok L. Got it covered. Thx.*

Lisa bit down hard on the candy cane and gnashed angrily on the minty confection. A shard cut the inside of her mouth and she could taste blood mixing with the sugar, and found it not at all unpleasant.

Porter was staying in London for Christmas this year. He'd invited her. *Sis*, he'd texted, *come and avail yourself of Christmas Pudding and Yorkshire Pudding and Black Pudding and White Pudding. Dude . . . we have been getting pudding all wrong.* But she couldn't afford it,

and she couldn't bear it if he paid for her. Her parents were going on a cruise. If Brynn were *here* here, she'd invite Lisa over. But now, it seemed, Lisa would be on her own.

''Tis the fucking season,' Lisa muttered quietly to herself as she smiled and nodded at a hotel guest striding across the lobby. 'Joy to the fucking world.'

In the end, Lisa offered to work on Christmas. The thought of spending it alone in her apartment was too awful.

And then, two weeks into the new year, Brynn woke up.

Speaking fucking *French.*

Quelle horreur!

'Thank you, Lisa,' Eric sobbed down the phone when he called to let her know. 'I don't know what we would have done without you.' When the words she'd been pining for finally landed in her ears, they fell flat. Things were different now that Brynn was awake.

Brynn had needed physical therapy for some minor issues with the right side of her body, which had since cleared up entirely – another miracle! Doctors and scientists and journalists were coming from all over the country to examine her, interview her, congratulate her, *look* at her. The media described Brynn as a *beautiful young wife and mother.* One newscaster went so far as to say she was *reminiscent of the classic women of the country whose language she now so mysteriously speaks, Elderpool's own Brigitte Bardot!*

That was nearly four months ago now. Lisa and Brynn turned twenty-seven six weeks apart in early 2013 without margaritas at Buster's for old times' sake; they'd both said they were too busy, but Lisa knew they just didn't quite know how to spend time with each other anymore. And now it was the first of April – April Fool's Day – and Lisa felt very much like the butt of a joke. Lisa had only seen Brynn a handful of times since she was discharged from hospital, but each time she did – and each time she heard her – she had the nagging sensation that Brynn was faking it. If not entirely faking it, then she was yucking it up. And Lisa could see the toll it was taking on Eric and Jenny, the haunted look in Eric's eyes, the ways that Jenny was behaving like a

baby. Just like before Brynn's accident, when Brynn would moan and complain about Eric, Lisa felt that her role was to go along with whatever Brynn was doing. But since Brynn had woken up, something had shifted between them. Sure, Brynn had forgiven her for *The Song*, but it was clear to Lisa that they would not be going back to the way they were, and Lisa couldn't tell if this was good or bad for her. But she knew that it was getting harder and harder not to call Brynn out, to force her to admit that she was *choosing* the French in some way, toying with everyone.

Standing behind the front desk at the Elderpool Ramada, the thick black nylons she was mandated to wear itched her calves and chafed her thighs, and sagged annoyingly below her crotch. The skirt suit was uncomfortable and the collar buttoned all the way up to her trachea felt like a noose around her neck. The rings on her fingers were too tight. She hadn't been sleeping well, and she was fairly certain she was coming down with something; her stomach hadn't felt quite right the last few days.

She tried to arrange her face into a mask of productivity, should any guest or coworker walk past. Lately, she had felt something shifting inside her. She supposed it was a re-evaluation of her life, her goals, her choices. Of everything. Since the accident, Brynn had changed so much that Lisa had felt compelled to keep up and initiate her own metamorphosis. But it occurred to her now that she quite literally didn't know what she wanted if she couldn't run it through the Brynn-sieve first. But was that really Brynn's fault? Lisa doubted it. She knew it must be some defect of her own, an emotional deformity, that had allowed her to give over so much of herself to someone else in this way. What *was* her personal style? What music did *she* love? How did *she* want her apartment arranged? Even now she could feel the rumble of hunger that signaled it was nearly her lunch break, but she didn't even know what she wanted to eat. When she couldn't imagine what Brynn might be doing, she didn't know what she wanted at all. *How could you not know?* she chided herself.

Shit, Lisa thought as she nibbled at a hangnail, *is this an epiphany?* She hoped it wasn't even as she knew it was. Epiphanies, she knew, were things you had to take responsibility for. Like a parking ticket or a baby – once you had them, you couldn't unhave them. She resolved

to put herself first from now on, to prioritize getting to know herself better. To actually do the things she read about in *Boss Bitch*. The first step, she knew, was to visit Brynn and practice Radical Honesty and to speak her truth – to recover some of her power, to make sure Brynn was aware that Lisa was onto her.

Buzzing with conviction, Lisa drove directly over to the Mitchell house as soon as her shift ended. 'Knock knock,' she called out as she let herself in the Mitchells' front door, 'it's just me!'

'In here!' Brynn called out. Lisa followed her voice into the living room. It was four in the afternoon and Brynn was in her pajamas on the couch, and Lisa wasn't sure whether she'd been in them all day or had put them on early; Jenny, sucking her thumb, was curled up on Brynn's lap, Ginger lying at her feet. Brynn had put on a few pounds, but it only served to give her curves where she'd previously had none.

The house was an absolute mess.

The kitchen table was covered in takeout containers.

As Lisa expected, Brynn couldn't be both the enchanting medical mystery and the perfect wife and mother; it was not possible for her friend to keep up two acts at once.

'She asks for the breast these days,' Brynn told her, placing a kiss on Jenny's head while gently pulling her thumb out of her mouth with a quiet *tsk tsk.* Lisa cringed every time she heard Brynn speak. The way she said *zee bresst zees dayz.*

'Well, she's been traumatized,' Lisa pointed out.

'Yes, but by zee *event*, not by zee *French*.'

'That's crazy, Brynn. The *event* was traumatizing, I'm sure. But imagine if you were four years old and your mom woke up speaking a different language and acting strange.'

'I'm gonna be five,' Jenny chimed in, holding her hand out to display all five fingers.

'You are, Jenny, you're gonna be five,' Lisa said, and then – more to Brynn than to Jenny, 'you're a *big* girl.'

'How am I acting strange?' Brynn had Jenny's toes at her lips now and was pretending to eat them, much to Jenny's delight. But it was a

game for a baby, and Lisa found it grotesque and unnerving.

'Everything about you has changed, Brynn.'

'How? Tell me?' She seemed to find the idea that she'd changed so dramatically compelling. Lisa didn't want to give her the satisfaction.

'Not *everything* everything,' she lied, for she found everything, down to the way Brynn walked, a newly minted sashay, changed. 'Your house is a mess. You don't take care of Eric and Jenny the way you used to.'

'I am in recovery.' *Een recoveree.* Lisa wanted to punch her in the face.

'Eric told me your doctors say that you are physically perfectly fine.'

'*Bon, alors*.'

'English!'

'What do you want, Lisa? Why are you here?'

'Are you serious? I am trying to be radically honest with you, Brynn. To help you. To try to get you to stop this stupid game.'

'It's not a game, Leese. You don't believe me? You think I can just awake from the coma and poof, I speak perfect French, words I did not know before, in a perfect accent? Don't you understand that even now I am *thinking* in French? I have to *try* to speak English to you now. When you speak to me, I am translating. Something has occurred in my *cerebellum*, Lisa. I am a medical *mystère*. Don't you think it is *formidable*?'

Lisa could see her evident pride and it incensed her; she was barely trying to hide it. 'Eric is going crazy – it's not fair.'

'This is not something I have did to Eric.'

'*Done. Done* to Eric. And yes, yes it is. What about your parents?'

'They are maybe confused, but they will be fine. I am still the same person.'

'Jenny is suffering.'

'Jenny will be fine.' Brynn growled as she clutched Jenny closer, pulling a quilt across them both like a barrier between them and Lisa. 'She is learning French. It is good for her. Isn't it, *chérie*?'

Jenny made baby noises and passed her hands across Brynn's breasts, putting her thumb back in her mouth.

'Do you even want to go back to normal? Back to . . . English?'

'*Mais bien sur!*' Brynn answered brightly. 'But, what is normal, Lisa?' And Lisa saw something mean flash across Brynn's face. She felt her stomach tighten; regardless of the accent, she knew that tone. Brynn was laying a trap.

Lisa tried to sound amused when she said, 'What do you mean?'

'Well,' Brynn flexed and pointed her beautiful feet poking out of the quilt, and Lisa was transfixed by their ropy, dancer-like tendons, the tangerine nail polish, 'eez it *normale* that you . . .' Brynn cupped her palms around her mouth in a pantomime of excluding Jenny, '*looooooove* Aireek?'

Lisa felt her mouth go dry. Tried to think of a reply. A version of this moment had played out in Lisa's imagination so many times, but in her fantasy Eric was beside her, claiming her, defending her, letting Brynn down easy. Before she could formulate a response, Brynn laughed. Even her laugh had changed. It was somehow more musical, more lilting; as if she needed *more* charm.

'Eet's okay, Leesa, eef you love 'eem, you can 'ave 'eem!'

Bile rose in Lisa's throat and a wave of nausea rolled through her. *This isn't fair*, she thought, *this isn't fair.* Something hardened inside of her – speak your truth! – so when she finally spoke, her voice was steady and each word shot from her mouth like a poison blow-dart.

'You never *wanted* any of this, Brynn.' Lisa waved her hands in the air to indicate the house and everything and everyone inside it. 'And you never deserved it.'

Chapter Seven

The June sun poured through the windows at the gym where Eric was seven reps into his third set of bench presses when Miss Lucy, Jenny's Sunday School teacher, rang to tell him that Brynn had not come to pick Jenny up. Yes, they'd tried calling her multiple times. No, she hadn't answered. So Eric had to leave the gym, sweaty and agitated, and drive to Elderpool Evangelical to collect his daughter, who was also sweaty and agitated.

He tried ringing Brynn several times on the drive home, but got no answer. They had made a plan, hadn't they? He and Jenny would go to Sunday services together – Brynn no longer feigned interest in church – and then he would go to the gym while Jenny stayed for Sunday School – from which Brynn was supposed to pick her up. So where the hell was she? And while he knew he should default to worry, he was just mad. Looking in his rearview mirror at Jenny in her car seat, he tried to keep his heart rate normal. Made an effort not to shout *Fucking go, asshole!* when the car in front of him was going twenty in a forty zone.

When they got home and found Brynn sitting on the couch stroking Ginger like nothing was amiss, Eric went from mad to outraged.

When Brynn simply looked up at him and said, in her very un-American English, 'Oh, sorry! I was lost in my thoughts. I just watched the most interesting documentary, I forgot the time,' his outrage turned to fury. And when he asked her why she hadn't answered her phone, she said, 'Ah! I don't even know where I left it; I think it's in the bathroom,' his fury boiled over into full-throttle, red-hot wrath.

The only way he knew to calm himself was to get behind the wheel of his truck and drive away from her. He considered calling Carmen,

blowing off his steam in a hotel room with her, but he'd broken things off when Brynn was in the hospital and didn't have the energy to rekindle whatever they'd had – rekindling would require words, and he was so goddamn tired of words.

And so he drove, aimlessly but vigilantly. He was trying not to think about Carmen, or about the porn he'd watched in his office last week, or of the sense that his anger toward Brynn was beginning to feel . . . aggressive.

He had been trying so hard to rid himself of evil thoughts, to atone for his own sins, to make up for the hour and five minutes he had abandoned his family the night Brynn had her accident. Yes, he'd faltered. But he, unlike Brynn, was at least trying to right the ship. Brynn, it seemed, had jumped into a lifeboat that was only big enough for her, and was happily paddling away from him. She was not in any way disturbed by her condition, nor did she seem inclined to try to get back to normal.

He took a left at the bottom of the slope onto Juniper. He'd always liked this street. The homes had been built before the Elderpool Terrace development and had just kind of been lassoed up by it. Sturdy, modest, ivy-covered American Colonials all, they reminded him of his childhood back in Ohio, of the Fourth of July and trick-or-treating. He slowed the truck to a crawl.

Even as he tried to stay focused on the *real* enemies the news was droning on about – the criminals, the strangers, the terrorists, the *others* – his mind kept drifting back to Brynn. Every word that came out of her mouth – every mispronunciation and odd inflection – vexed him. And, he recognized, *embarrassed* him. Of all the languages she could have chosen, she had to choose the tongue of the leftie weaklings; too anti-war to fight with the Americans in Iraq, he lamented, but not too anti-war to accept American help when the Nazis were climbing the Eiffel Tower. But it wasn't just the words she was misspeaking that bothered him, it was what the words seemed to be doing to her. The same woman who had run their household on an almost military-esque schedule had forgotten to pick up their child today . . . because she was watching a *documentary.* The same woman who would message him all day long – reminders to bring home laundry detergent, to let him know they were going to the park – didn't

even know where her phone was? But she wasn't the same woman, was she?

When they'd met, she'd struck him as such a blank slate, an empty vessel – not that he thought she was dumb, quite the opposite. He'd thought she had aptitude and potential that had simply been untapped, and that he would be the one to guide her, to form her into the best possible version of herself. But now, he wondered who she'd really voted for in the privacy of the election booth, where her allegiances actually lay. He imagined her rapping a secret knock onto a basement door with her delicate knuckles – *c'est moi* – and attending secret leftie meetings. Lately, when he looked at the American flag he'd put in their yard – which used to be such a source of pride and purpose – he felt guilty, like he was harboring a criminal. He longed to turn her in . . . but to who? The police? The FBI? He had considered lowering the flag to half-mast, to signal his confusion and grief.

Bitch. The word – red and throbbing – pulsed into being like a neon light in his mind. He tried to ignore it. *Fucking ungrateful bitch*, brighter, insistent. He said the words out loud, hoping that would appease them. Like his mother used to say to him when he was sick and vomiting, *better out than in*. It seemed to work.

Eric continued his meandering patrol and, turning onto Marigold Crescent, he saw a crowd of people gathered around something on the front lawn of the Zwick house. He had the sinking feeling someone had died, that the crowd was standing around a body, or *bodies*, that the murderer, or *murderers*, was at large, running this very moment through their backyards, hiding in their children's treehouses. What he'd always known would happen was happening; his personal patch of America was under attack. He lurched ahead and pulled up to the curb haphazardly, practically falling out of the car. He was just about to yell out when he realized the people weren't standing in a circle at all; rather, they were milling about, holding lamps and thumbing through books, testing wheels on exercise bikes. 'Garage sale,' Eric murmured to himself through gritted teeth. Ashamed of his miscalculation, he was attempting to head back to his car unseen when Frank Zwick called out, 'Mitchell, that you?' and made a beeline toward him, hand outstretched, wearing a WWJD t-shirt.

'Frank,' Eric said, shaking his calloused hand.

‘Leaving without saying hello?’

‘No, no. Just going back for my wallet,’ Eric improvised.

‘Ah shit, Mitchell, you know your money’s no good here. It’s all crap, really. If you see something you want, it’s yours. Heck, I should pay you to take it away.’ Laughing loudly at his own joke, Frank Zwick put a muscled arm around Eric’s shoulder and shepherded him toward the cluttered lawn.

Eric had met Frank the first Sunday he’d moved to Elderpool to take on his new role at Louey’s, and admittedly, he’d been enchanted by him. Frank Zwick was something of a local celebrity. He had been both the quarterback of the football team and the captain of the wrestling team, to which his cauliflowered earlobes still attested. Now he coached the church’s youth football league, despite having no children of his own, and organized food drives with his wife, Gabby. He even led the occasional bible study. Frank was handsome in a superhero kind of way, his wide cleft chin anchoring a slightly lopsided face that, although somehow always smiling, exuded a no-nonsense authority that Eric associated with people like John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. The fact that Frank swore like a sailor and was known to stumble out of local bars singing old church youth camp songs only served to make him more irresistible to everyone who encountered him. *Shit, son*, he was fond of saying, *I’m just a sorry, sinning son of a bitch who loves my whiskey with a chaser of Jesus*, or, when he was feeling less poetic, *Jesus is my designated driver.* He could be refused nothing.

‘Have a look-see,’ Frank instructed. ‘I’m sneaking inside for a little nip while the missus is at Costco, no offense to Louey’s, Mitchell.’

‘None taken.’

‘Come on in if you want to join me and the Son of God for a single malt,’ he said, winking, and disappeared into his garage yelling: ‘It’s all free, people! Just take it! God bless you!’

The crowd had dispersed somewhat, neighbors heading back to their houses with another man’s trash. Eric wandered around the lawn like he was surveying wreckage. He looked through a box of DVDs and found a copy of *Bridget Jones’s Diary.* Did Brynn like this movie? He vaguely recalled her watching it on television, her legs curled up

underneath her, Ginger at her side, a glass of chardonnay in her hand. Maybe he'd bring it home for her. Maybe it would help. But he didn't feel like helping her anymore today, so he put it back in its shoebox. He rattled a mason jar full of ball bearings. Ran his hand across a large, wooden African mask, probably a souvenir from one of the Zwicks' many missionary trips, leaving his handprint in the dust. He lightly kicked at an old lawnmower, as if he were trying to wake it up. He was just about to follow Frank into the house – a nip of whiskey might be just what he needed – when he heard a woman's voice, raspy and reedy, speak directly into his ear: *Eric*. He spun around, but there was nobody there. He heard it again – sultry and seductive – he spun again, his head swiveling further than was comfortable. He swatted at his ear. Again he heard his name. So close. He looked at the faces of the other millers-about, but nobody was even looking at him, let alone addressing him. *Eric*, he heard again, and this time his eyes darted toward an object sitting atop a pile of threadbare blankets on a plastic card table. He thought he could detect a slight movement, a small, vibrating pulse.

He wasn't quite sure what it was, even when he was holding it in both hands, turning it over, wiping off the dust with his sleeve. It was a bulbous, curvy piece of polished wood in the shape of a shell, or a cinnamon roll, a petrified scroll. Oak? Mahogany? He was not the kind of man who knew these things. He could tell by the way one side of it was rough and unstained that it was meant to be fitted to something larger. A bedpost? An armrest? Whatever it was, it was beautiful. He put his ear to it and swore he heard a kind of singing.

A song he'd never heard before but somehow he knew all the words.

A song just for him.

'Ah, in need of a volute, are you?' Frank said as Eric walked into the kitchen with the object tucked under his arm.

'A what?'

'A *volute*, it's for the end of a staircase,' he was pouring Eric a drink, neat, as he spoke. 'You know, the fancy end part of a handrail.'

‘Oh, is that what this is?’ Eric had a vision of old-fashioned, aristocratic galas where women descended stairs with gloved hands on banisters.

‘Your place is a one-story, right?’

‘Yeah, but maybe I’ll do something with this, you know, like a project or something.’ Eric could still hear the volute singing under his arm.

‘Whatever floats your boat, Mitchell, as long as you’re taking it off my lawn.’ They clinked glasses (*To everlasting life in the kingdom of God!* Frank proposed) and sipped their drinks, exhaling loudly in unison. Eric took a seat on a stool across from Frank and put the volute on the kitchen island between them before changing his mind and putting it in his lap. *A volute*, he thought, *the first thing you touch on your way up, and the last thing you touch on your way down.*

‘So, Mitchell.’ Frank’s voice carried the tail end of a laugh from the joke he’d just told (*What did one saggy tit say to the other? Perk up or people will think we’re nuts!*). ‘How’s it all going with the missus, you know, with her . . . thing?’

Eric shifted in his seat.

Frank refilled their tumblers.

Eric was feeling tipsy already.

‘I don’t know, man. She’s still speaking French.’ Eric sipped the whiskey and petted the volute in his lap like a cat. (Was it purring? He swore he could hear a purr.)

‘I’m so sorry, brother. So what, she doesn’t speak English at all anymore?’

‘No, it’s not like that, she still understands English and can speak it, for the most part. *She* says it’s like, you know when you learn a language?’

‘I picked up a little Swahili when I was doing missionary work.’

‘Yeah, so you know how you think in English and then you have to mentally translate a word into the language you’re learning? It’s like that, she says, except the other way round: she thinks in French and has to translate into English. Something like that.’ He trailed off. ‘I don’t know.’

‘That’s crazy, Mitchell, I mean, is it real?’

‘The doctors say it happens. Happened to some teenager in

California who got in a motorcycle accident, woke up speaking fluent Swedish, never been to Sweden. Another lady woke up from knee surgery speaking Mandarin. So, yeah, I guess it's a thing that happens.'

'What do *you* think?'

Eric couldn't remember the last time someone had asked him that. None of the doctors had, not his parents or his in-laws, certainly not Brynn. 'Well, to be honest, I think maybe it *was* real, in the beginning. I mean, she was in a coma, had brain surgery. Fair enough that she was all mixed up. But now, I don't know. I think maybe she's . . . extending it.'

'Faking it, you mean.'

Eric downed the rest of his whiskey, and Frank refilled it again. 'Yeah, maybe. I think she could make it stop. If she wanted to.'

'Disobedience.'

'What?'

'Disobedience, Mitchell.' Frank leaned across the counter and adopted a distinctly man-to-man pose. Eric was not a fan of deep, personal conversations between men. Frank, who was a central pillar of their church's men's fellowship circle, was known for them.

'Brynn a true believer?'

'Yeah,' Eric exaggerated.

'Well, then, surely she must understand what God expects from a wife?'

'Well, she . . .' Eric stammered.

'God wants a wife to be obedient to her husband and to serve the best interests of her family. What happens if two people try to drive a car at once, Mitchell?'

'Well, you –'

'You crash and kill everyone in the car, Mitchell, that's what happens. Everyone dies. Only one person can drive a car at a time, agreed?'

'Agreed.'

'And a family is like a car, agreed?'

'Agreed.'

'But, you know, men like us,' Frank smiled his quarterback smile, 'we like our women with a little fire, right? A little feistiness. Am I

right? *Am I right?*' He leaned across the counter again and punched Mitchell hard in the shoulder.

'Yeah, yeah,' Eric muttered, his bladder suddenly demanding emptying.

'So maybe you've given her the impression that two people can drive a car at the same time.' Frank leaned back and crossed his thick arms over his chest. 'A little advice, Mitchell? If I were you? And Gabby were pulling this shit? You need to reestablish God as the centerpiece of your home, and anchor yourselves in traditional family values, the family values that made this country great. Amen?'

'Amen,' Eric repeated quietly.

An awkward silence fell between the two men. Eric wasn't sure what he was supposed to say next. Frank stood up and pinched their empty glasses together between two meaty fingers and placed them in the sink. Eric gripped the volute as he watched Frank come around the counter and place both of his giant, Family Values hands on Eric's shoulders. 'Eric, this is a critical time for your family. You are at a crossroads. You are *losing control of your wife* and I promise you, deep down, she *wants* you to bring her back to the Lord. Go home to your wife and pray, and I'll bet green American money she'll be speaking English by suppertime.'

That night, after a tense dinner and after Jenny had been put to bed, Eric asked Brynn to pray with him. She'd hesitated, but when he sat down on the couch and extended both of his hands toward her and said, 'Please, Brynn,' she'd taken his hands and sat down next to him. He knew it was her pity for him that had convinced her, but he didn't care. Holding both of her hands in his, they shut their eyes and he began. He asked the Lord to bless their family, he asked the Lord to forgive them both for their sinful nature, he asked the Lord to heal Brynn, to fix her brain. He promised the Lord that if He did, they would live their lives in service to Him, rededicate themselves to Him. He felt the hair on the back of his neck rise and the energy of faith move through him, pinball around his chest and shoot out through his hands, which held Brynn's. But when he opened his eyes to confirm

that she was feeling it too . . . she was laughing. Trying not to, but laughing.

Eric moved into the guest room. Brynn didn't stop him. He'd been so angry, so humiliated, outraged on behalf of God – who Brynn had mocked with her laughter – that he was sure he wouldn't sleep. But, miraculously, he did; a deep, dead-to-the-world, dreamless sleep. And when he woke the next morning, refreshed, he knew exactly why. It could only be the volute, his wooden angel, who had spent the night nestled in the crook of his arm. She had bestowed it.

Later that day, Frank confirmed what Eric already knew.

'Sorry to call you at work, buddy,' Frank's sermon voice bellowed down the phone line.

'Not a problem,' Eric said, trying to match Frank's big-chested tone, 'everything okay?'

'Yes, yes, although I did get in a little trouble about that volute I gave you yesterday. Apparently it's a family heirloom on Gabby's side.' Eric's guts lurched like he'd just been dropped from a great height, was Frank about to take it – *her* – away from him?

'Oh is that so?' Eric managed, though his mouth had gone dry.

'Well, it's not for certain,' Frank said, 'it's more like Barnes family lore – that's Gabby's people, from Lexington, Virginia. *Apparently*,' Frank's tone had turned glib, 'the volute comes from the original banister of Stonewall Jackson's residence during the War.'

'Oh, wow,' Eric said, imagining the general in his blue coat, brass buttons gleaming, bayoneted rifle over his shoulder, his hand resting on the volute, whistling Dixie. He shivered.

'Well, before you get too excited, there's no papers or proof or anything, it may well be just one of those old wives' tales that's been passed through the generations – some great, great uncle playing a prank that's lasted longer than he expected.'

Eric tried to laugh, but it came out like a choking cough. He reached for the cold cup of coffee on his desk and drank it down.

'Look, Mitchell,' Frank said in his signature man-to-man way, 'Gabby wanted me to get it back, but we don't need another piece of

junk taking up space in the basement – this is why we had a garage sale to begin with! So I promised her I'd call you and tell you that you have a very special piece of American history on your hands, and that she hopes you do something special with it. She just wants to make sure it doesn't end up at the dump.'

Eric was lightheaded with relief. 'Oh, don't you worry,' he said, blood back in his voice. 'I'll do something special with her . . . *it*.'

'You do that, Mitchell. God bless.' Frank ended the call.

Eric lifted the volute out of the gym bag where he'd hidden her under a towel. Holding her felt like praying, and again he felt a surge of power shoot through his hands but this time it landed in his balls. He felt righteous. He felt chosen. He felt as dangerous as a confederate general racing like a bullet into battle.

She sang to him, Mary. He couldn't very well call her Volute. He'd done some reading since Frank's call, and learned about Mary Anna Jackson, Stonewall's loyal wife, who was with the great man when he died, and was forever known as the Widow of the Confederacy. Eric felt certain that the volute was imbued with Mary Anna's steadfast virtue. It was not lost on him that Mary Anna was named after *the* Mary, the most perfect woman to have ever graced God's green earth. He marveled at the coincidence of it all, but soon came to see it as not at all coincidental. It felt . . . divine. So Mary it would be.

And the more he listened to Mary, the clearer her voice became.

Mary told him that he was good, and noble, and strong, and worthy.

Mary told him that Brynn was sick, infected with something ugly and malignant.

Mary told him that he was being tested, to stay the course, to keep the faith.

Mary told him to believe her; she knew what she was talking about.

So he did. And she rewarded him for his faith. She rewarded him with sleep. With peace. With a renewed sense that he was entitled to the best of everything. That the world was broken, not him. That his

wife was broken, not him.

He knew that nobody else could hear her, but that didn't make him feel crazy. He got it: she existed for him. It made him feel blessed. Like something sacred was unfolding for him alone to witness; it made him feel like a prophet. Mary was his burning bush, hers was the voice of God. But unlike a prophet from the Bible, he wasn't meant to spread this news. Eric wasn't foolish enough to think that the world would understand. Besides, in the wake of Brynn's madness, his impulse toward self-preservation wasn't so deadened that he'd allow another baffling phenomenon to threaten him or Jenny. And it was, he knew, baffling.

He googled it, and he learned he wasn't alone: that there were people who had openly declared their love for objects – roller coasters, the Golden Gate Bridge, trees, Barbie dolls, an old radio, rocks and pillows. But along with his relief – *this is real, this is a thing that happens* – Eric also felt a creeping, sticky dread spread across his chest. While he recognized his connection with Mary in these stories, recognized his devotion, he did not recognize *himself* in these people. These freaks and misfits, these social pariahs. He did not want to be branded an outcast. He was a Christian, for God's sake, a card-carrying Republican, a general manager and an employer, a father, a son . . . *a husband*? He wasn't sure about that last one.

Was there a world where Brynn could be French and he could have such strong feelings for Mary? Was there room in a marriage for other tongues, other objects? What would this require of him? For starters, it would require an empathy for Brynn that he couldn't quite conjure. Even if she hadn't been in control of her condition in the beginning, Eric was certain she was now. That was not at all like what he was experiencing with Mary; there was no ulterior motive there, only purity. This wasn't an act, he thought, as he reached across to where Mary reclined on her pillow next to him, emanating serenity and peace, and stroked her smooth varnish.

He hated to think of how many hands had passed over her when she was affixed to the end of Stonewall's banister. How many unthinking, unloving caresses she'd had to endure. How many grubby children's fingerprints and handbags slung around her neck, how many indignities she had suffered on her way to him.

Chapter Eight

August was Brynn's favorite time of the year. The dog days of summer afternoons unrolling like a yellow brick road into fall with the chirps and thrums of crickets, katydids and cicadas. Cornflowers, echinacea and roses opening wide to the sun, drinking their gutful of light. She had flip-flop tan lines on her feet and freckles like epaulets on her shoulders. The carpet in her minivan was covered in lakeshore sand and smelled of coconut sunscreen. She wished she was at the lake now, instead of sitting across from her mom at Starbucks.

Their silence was not the easy quiet between two people who understood each other, who were happy simply to be in each other's company. It was the first time in the eight months since Brynn had woken up that she and her mother had been alone together. Out of the blue, Dana had texted her, asking if they could have a conversation in private, but now neither of them knew where to begin.

Brynn regarded her mother. She could read her discomfort in the way her hands were folded neatly in her lap, in the skittish way she looked anywhere but directly at Brynn. This is not a thing they had done before, grabbing a coffee and a muffin, just because.

'What's going on, *Maman*, what do you want to talk about?' Brynn tried to get things started as she stirred sugar into her iced cappuccino with a wooden stick.

Dana sighed loudly, cleared her throat, reached into her giant purse for a tissue which she used to blow her nose, muttered, 'Allergies,' and then cleared her throat again before finally saying, 'I've spoken with Eric. Your father and I are concerned, Brynn.'

'About what, exactly?'

'Brynn, please, don't make this harder on purpose.'

'Make *what* harder, Mom?'

'It's really quite hard to *understand* you, you know,' Dana said

slowly, like she was talking to a child.

'What did Eric say?' Inwardly she fumed. For weeks he'd been carrying around a strange piece of wood that he stroked and whispered to when he didn't think she was watching. He hid it in his gym bag when he went to work. He did not feel at all compelled to explain himself to her yet he had the audacity to call her mother? To do what exactly? Tell on her?

'He wonders, as do your father and I, whether or not some of this . . . this language thing, might be a little . . . exaggerated.'

Brynn said nothing. She took a sip of her cappuccino, a bite of her blueberry muffin. She looked out the window and then back at her mother. 'Mom,' she finally said, 'can we try something different?'

'What are you talking about, Brynn?'

'Can we try talking to each other like we're two women who respect each other, who have curiosity about each other's inner lives?'

Dana looked at her as if Brynn was reading the ingredients aloud from the back of a shampoo bottle, mystified.

Brynn continued, 'Mom, what do you think you would have done with your life if you hadn't met Dad? If you hadn't had the store? If you hadn't had me?'

Dana pinched her mouth together in a tight bud and the H between her eyebrows deepened. She went to speak, stopped, tried again, stopped.

'It's okay, Mom,' Brynn intervened. 'I won't take it personally, I'm genuinely curious, what did you *want*? Before?'

Dana glanced at the door and Brynn thought she was considering making a run for it. She was just about to prod her again when Dana announced, a bit too loudly, 'Dancer.' She looked as shocked to hear the word come out of her own mouth as Brynn was to hear it. A memory surfaced then. Brynn, about fourteen, had been in the basement looking for something when she'd come across an old cardboard moving box, unlabeled and old enough that the brown packing tape had lost its stick and was peeling up at the edges. She'd opened it, and inside she'd found old ballet slippers, pointe shoes with long satin ribbons, pink leotards and tulle tutus, leg warmers and plastic barrettes. She'd known they were her mother's things, because they weren't her own, and they were musty with age. She remembered

it had made her sad in a way she didn't understand. A kind of secondhand nostalgia. Inherited regret. She'd closed up the box and never asked her mother about it. They didn't talk like that.

'Dancer?' Brynn confirmed.

'Yes, well,' Dana said, flummoxed and uncomfortable, 'that's a very silly thing to ask.' And then she excused herself to go to the ladies' room.

Eric left for the gym the moment Brynn got home from meeting her mom. It was a warm, golden afternoon, so she put the sprinkler on in the backyard under the shade of the sugar maple. In a month its leaves would trade their translucent chlorophyll green for blazing red. But now, Jenny ran through the sprays of arcing water in her *Brave* swimsuit. Jenny always said that Brynn looked like Merida, with her unruly halo of auburn curls. Brynn thought Jenny looked like Every Good Thing personified. Like if birthday cake and fresh peaches, your favorite song and Saturday mornings were a little girl, they'd be Jenny, dashing through sunbeams and under plumes of water, cascading diamond droplets. If the world would just leave the two of them alone, Brynn thought, if they could live in this moment forever on a loop, their lives a perpetual summer's afternoon, they'd be okay. After all, moments like these existed outside of language.

Later, back inside and wrapped in a towel, Jenny asked, '*Maman?*'

'*Oui, mon coeur?*'

'*Je peux avoir une glace?*'

'*Peut-etre, après ton diner.*'

'What the fuck, Brynn.' Eric stormed into the kitchen with his shoes still on. Both mother and daughter startled, and Jenny began to weep. 'Do NOT make her speak that god-DAMNED language, do you hear me?' He had Brynn by her shoulders, shaking her with every word he spat. 'Speak *English*! Speak it *right*!'

'Eric,' Brynn was crying. *Aireek!*

'Daddy,' Jenny was crying. *Papa!*

'What did I do wrong? Why are you doing this to me?' Eric was crying then too. 'I'm sorry,' he cried, 'I'm sorry.'

That night, Eric knocked gently on the door of the room he no longer shared with Brynn and asked to come in. He sat cross-legged like a child on the bed, the strange wooden object on his lap, apologized for his outburst, and confessed all of his sins, every infidelity, every gluttonous binge, covetous fantasy and murderous thought to Brynn. When he was done, he looked at her with red, watery eyes and begged, 'There. Will you stop now? Can you stop now?'

She received his unburdening placidly. She found that she wasn't angry about Carmen or any of his other transgressions. If anything, she felt a kind of relief. She was no longer the only broken one in their home. She recalled all of the secrets she'd kept from him about her teenage years, the sex she'd had and the drugs she'd done and *The Song*. It was her shame that had bound her to him, their marriage a kind of atonement. But it turned out that she'd just been a confused and curious teenager and he was the real deviant, and worse: a hypocrite. In this way she was grateful for his confession.

She considered his question. The truth was, Brynn didn't know if she could stop or not. She knew that Eric, her parents and Lisa – who she had not spoken to since Lisa's last visit months ago – all thought she was faking it. But she wasn't. Her inner voice was French. Even when she was alone, speaking just to Ginger, she spoke French. But could she – if she really tried, exerted all of her will and focus – force herself to speak English the *right* way? She didn't know that either, and she was scared to try. To Eric all she said was, '*Non*.'

The next morning, Brynn stood in the hallway, peeking into the living room, eavesdropping. Eric was lying back on the recliner as far as it would go so that Jenny, standing behind him, could brush his hair. 'Got to get the tangles,' Jenny said as she combed. 'Do you want it to be poofy?' she asked. Eric said yes, please, make it extra poofy. 'Poof, poof, poof,' Jenny said, mussing up the hair she'd just flattened. 'Close your eyes,' Jenny instructed him, 'you have to put these on.' Eric closed his eyes and Jenny placed a cucumber slice – two discs of green Play-Doh – over each one. 'Okay, now pick a color,' Jenny said,

taking Eric's hand in hers, 'we have pink or purple or pink glitter or . . .' Eric asked for pink glitter. Jenny squealed – pink glitter was her favorite – and proceeded to make-believe paint his nails with a Q-tip. When she was done, she said, 'One million dollars, please, Daddy!' and Eric sat up suddenly, the cucumbers falling from his eyes, and said, 'One million dollars!? How about one million tickles!' And proceeded to chase her around the living room, Ginger joining in excitedly, which was also Jenny's favorite thing. Eric's anger at Jenny's French utterances was long forgotten, even if his anger at Brynn remained at a steady boil. He was not a good husband, Brynn thought, but he was a good dad.

The last day of August came and pollinated Brynn's brain with a cherry-chocolate-scented mischievousness. It was a sweltering afternoon and she was craving solitude. So she dropped Jenny with her parents and went to Barnes & Noble, where she bought a Danielle Steel paperback with a yellow $6.99 sticker covering the face of the heroine – all the better for Brynn to superimpose herself. She'd have preferred a French translation, but it would do. She added the book to her basket of snacks and sunblock, towel and sunhat. She did not bring her phone. She took off her engagement ring and wedding band under the pretense of not getting them wet, but she'd never put them on again. They no longer suited her. Unreachable, she swam, she read, she napped, and swam some more. She was late to pick up Jenny. It was a perfect day.

September announced itself dramatically, with gusts of brisk autumn wind snapping and jerking the flag on the front lawn of 702 Matador Street and blowing fallen leaves across the lawn. Jenny was at preschool and Brynn was home alone with Ginger, and there was nothing in particular she felt like doing. There was laundry to fold or toilets to clean or carpets to vacuum, but she couldn't muster the energy. Instead, she made herself a strong cup of tea, sat down on the

couch and turned on the television. Flipping through the channels, she landed on a documentary on the Discovery Channel called *Nature's Worst Mothers*. She sipped her tea and watched a harp seal abandon her twelve-day-old pup on a cold sheet of ice, never to return. She saw a cunning cuckoo lay her eggs in another female's nest, tricking her into raising them for her while she soared away in search of her next mating. A mother sparrow murdered the chicks of other females fathered by her partner, to ensure he focused his attention on *her* babies and not theirs. Brynn observed the brutality of black bears who, if unlucky enough to have a litter of one, would often abandon it to die, because one cub wasn't worth her time and resources. Beetles, skinks, pandas and rabbits; it turned out they would all warrant a visit from Child Protective Services. The documentary made Brynn feel pretty good about herself, all things considered. The narrator – a knock-off Morgan Freeman – spoke of these animal mothers in sinister tones and used phrases like *cold-hearted pragmatism* and *cruel self-preservation* to describe their behavior, but at no point were the animal fathers mentioned; it was as if these bears and birds had fertilized themselves. She wondered if perhaps anyone had made a documentary called *Nature's Worst Fathers* – she looked it up on her phone: they had not.

Sipping her tea, she thought about something Dr. Reyes had told her during their last teleconference. 'Did you know that there are over seven thousand languages in the world today?' Brynn had not known this, and found the figure hard to wrap her mind around. 'And, worryingly,' he continued, 'one language dies roughly every fourteen days.' He explained to her that these were mostly indigenous languages, tucked away in remote parts of the world, which died alongside their last speakers. 'It's such a pity,' Dr. Reyes said, 'because when we lose these languages, we lose all the stories embedded in them, the stories that could only be told in that particular language. Because we lose so much in even the most careful translations.'

Brynn thought about her second soul. *Seven thousand languages*, she marveled. Seven thousand different ways for a soul to perceive the world. Seven thousand ways to be a mother. Seven thousand ways to be a wife, a daughter, a woman. She imagined the last speaker of a

dying language uttering her final word before transforming into spirit. The thought of all these dying language-souls both saddened and galvanized her. She'd been given a gift, her second soul. She had a duty to clutch tightly to it. It was fucking *merveilleux*.

Her phone rang, jolting her out of her thoughts. It was the principal at Jenny's preschool, Miss Kristina.

''Allo?' Brynn answered.

'Um, is this Brynn Mitchell, Jenny's mom?'

'*Oui* – yes – this is me,' she stuttered. Miss Kristina asked if Brynn wouldn't mind popping in for a chat before she collected Jenny that afternoon.

An hour later, Brynn sat in the office feeling like she, too, was four years old. The office – the desk, the computer, the little wire basket full of pens and pencils, the stapler and telephone – all of it seemed like a toy version of the real thing. Perhaps this was because of the teddy bear–themed wallpaper strip and the framed posters of Anne Geddes photographs; soft, squishy babies asleep inside flowers, curled up inside a leaf. Even the chair Brynn sat on, across from Miss Kristina, seemed just a few inches shy of being a chair for grown-ups, her knees closer to her chest than she'd prefer for a serious conversation about her daughter. And that's what it was: *a very serious conversation*. Apparently, Jenny was displaying some troubling behavior which ranged from speaking in pronounced baby talk and sucking her thumb (something which Brynn had actually been trying to dissuade before preschool started up again) to hitting other children, refusing to share, and constantly demanding to be picked up.

'We have a strict no-hitting policy, Mrs. Mitchell,' Miss Kristina explained.

Brynn nodded her head. 'Of course,' she said, trying her best to hide her new accent. She sensed what was coming next.

'We are aware that the last nine months have been . . . *trying* . . . for your family, Mrs. Mitchell.'

Nine months and eleven days, Brynn thought, but instead she simply said, 'Yes.'

Miss Kristina went on to explain that because Jenny had always been such a sweet, well-behaved girl and she remained an important part of the Little Blossoms family, they'd like to give the Mitchells

some time to address the situation before they considered any further steps. Furthermore, she'd like to recommend a child and family therapist. She handed Brynn a post-it note with a name printed on it: *Dr. Judith Clay*.

Brynn's heart sank. Everything was not so fucking *merveilleux* after all.

Driving home from Little Blossoms, Jenny was secure in her car seat, singing 'Ring Around The Rosie'. For the first time since her awakening, Brynn felt the old familiar stirrings of panic – like an orchestra warming up, discordant and disorienting. The notion that her own daughter might require the services of Brynn's child psychologist, that Brynn would be forced to disclose her own history to Eric . . . it was out of the question.

You broke Jenny, she imagined him telling her, *you infected her.*

And what defense would she have?

Because, in her heart of hearts Brynn knew that she had put some distance between herself and Jenny. A bit of breathing space, a smidge, just enough for both of them to coexist with a little more . . . elbowroom. Harmless, right? But there were moments. Loud moments inside of her mind when Jenny's requirements of her felt so incessant and endless and yes . . . stifling. Moments where Brynn wanted to sit alone with her thoughts or go to the lake by herself and forget that she was a wife, a mother. Times when the words ringing through her brain felt so loud she was certain Jenny would hear them: You're in my way. *Tu es dans le chemin*. And this scared Brynn, this angry battering ram inside her, the chained velocity that surged through her. She had no way of knowing whether other mothers felt this way because there was no one she trusted enough to ask. So she did her best to drown it out with French children's songs and games – *alouette, gentille alouette* – to make it up to Jenny in other small ways, and she'd been hoping that eventually she'd find her feet again, mother-wise. She just needed more time.

But now…well. Perhaps she'd been looking at this all wrong. Perhaps she was being selfish. Glancing at Jenny in the rearview

mirror, small and vulnerable in her car seat, she felt the tentacles of love tighten their grip around her heart. She thought about what she'd told Lisa, that if she wanted Eric, she could have him – but did she really mean it? Would there be nothing about him she'd yearn for if she lost him? Nothing at all?

She ransacked the attic of her mind until she found the box she was searching for, dusty and cobwebbed, labeled *Things I love about Eric*. Opening it, she found a stack of memories, bound together like trading cards. Their wedding night, when they'd both been too exhausted to make love for the first time, so instead ate cheeseburgers on the bed covered in rose petals and watched *Shark Tank* until they fell asleep. When they did sleep together the next morning he'd been tender, slow, reverent – and she'd felt, for the first time in her life, that she was precious to someone. There was the time she'd got the flu and he'd tried to make her chicken soup, and he'd accidentally used sugar instead of salt and they'd laughed so hard after she'd spat it out that she'd forgotten for a moment how terrible she felt. The time he'd caught her crying in church and mistook it for the Holy Spirit (it had been, in a way; she'd not yet known she was pregnant, but her emotions were all over the place, and when she imagined Mary watching her son's torture and murder, she was truly overcome) – he'd wiped her tears with his thumb and then he'd just cradled his hand in his lap like a kitten, giving her tears all the time they needed to evaporate of their own accord.

They'd had their good moments, their tender moments. Granted, they had all occurred in the first six months of their relationship, but still, perhaps there were things worth saving.

She would will herself back to being the Brynn she was before the fall.

'Ashes to ashes,' Jenny sang as Brynn attempted to figure out what *trying* would actually entail.

'We all fall down,' Jenny sang as Brynn mouthed the word *Eric*, trying to find the right mouth shape and tongue maneuver to make it sound as All-American Apple Pie as she possibly could, but coming up short.

Chapter Nine

When Eric returned home from work that night, Mary under his arm, he was greeted with the intoxicating aroma of a chicken roasting in the oven. The house was tidier than it had been in ages. Following his nose nervously toward the kitchen, he came upon a scene that made him want to fall to his knees: Brynn, in her old apron, stirring butter into a bowl of mashed potatoes while Jenny, in her own mini apron, stood on a footstool next to her mother, making little cakes and pies out of Play-Doh.

'Daddy!' Jenny said when he entered the room. 'I'm making dessert.'

'Don't worry,' Brynn smiled at him, 'there is also a real apple pie.'

Was he hallucinating? Were his ears deceiving him? Brynn didn't sound *as* French as before, but nor did she sound American. She was over-pronouncing each word, speaking slowly and deliberately, hitting each *r* a bit too hard, and each word had a short tail of a breath at the end: *There. Is-ah. Also-ah. A. Real-ah. Apple-ah. Pie-ah.* Eric recognized the effort she must be making, but rather than softening him, it made him nervous. Why the sudden effort after all her stubborn recalcitrance?

Was it some kind of trick? Suddenly, the tableau before him didn't seem as wholesome as it had at first glance. It took on a distinctly suspicious tone, as if something sinister were lurking in the shadows. Would Brynn try to poison him? Strychnine in the mashed potatoes? Arsenic in the apple pie? Brynn wiped her hands on her apron and went to the fridge, retrieved a cold beer, and brought it over to him, placing it in his hand and then reaching up on her tiptoes to place a kiss on his cheek. If she noticed his slight flinch, she didn't let on. 'How. Was. Your. Day?' she asked, again deliberate and careful, each word a whole note.

‘Fine,’ he said, cautiously. ‘How was *your* day?’

‘Fine,’ Brynn said, returning to check on the roasting chicken. ‘Dinner will be ready soon.’ Jenny climbed down from her stool and bounded over to Eric, presented him with a glob of Play-Doh that she explained was a piece of birthday cake, and clambered up onto his lap.

Over dinner, Eric was aware of Brynn’s attempts to direct the conversation toward neutral waters. The weather was starting to turn, fall was in the air, what should they do for Jenny’s fifth birthday less than two months away? At the mention of a party, Eric winced and wondered if Brynn knew it was from shame – that he was embarrassed by her, by the idea of having guests over to their house to gawk at her.

Still, as he ate the chicken and mashed potatoes and didn’t keel over from poisoning, he relaxed into the awareness that Brynn seemed to be extending a kind of olive branch, so he did his best to take it. The three of them put on their best ensemble performance of the highly acclaimed play, *Family Dinner*, of which Brynn was both the playwright and the lead actor. Jenny performed her role flawlessly, as if there had never been a night where the show hadn’t gone on. Eric’s performance was strained, forced, and more than once he seemed to forget his lines.

After dinner, while Brynn was putting Jenny to bed, Eric thought about the articles Frank had been sending him ever since he’d run into him the day he found Mary. Articles about how feminism had torn apart the fabric of the American family. Some of them were even written by female pastors who argued that secretly, all women hated feminism, all women knew they’d been lied to by a movement that told them they should fight for a life outside the home, bring home their own bacon, when what they really wanted, what their souls naturally yearned for, was to be a Good Woman, at home with her children, taking care of her husband.

Brynn had been a Good Woman once before.

It seemed like tonight she was trying to be a Good Woman again.

He sensed that he needed to do something, to reassert himself somehow while at the same time positively reinforcing her good behavior tonight, like they’d done when they were training Ginger. He’d tried praying with Brynn, and she’d laughed at him. He’d tried unburdening himself of all his ungodly deeds, but she’d been

unmoved. He decided to try something else.

He tucked Mary under the blanket in the guest room and waited until Brynn crept silently out of Jenny's bedroom, noiselessly closing the door behind her, a finger to her lips when she saw him waiting in the hallway, leaning against the doorframe to the master bedroom. 'She's asleep,' Brynn said.

'Thank you for tonight,' Eric began. 'It was nice.'

'*Pas de* . . . I mean, it's no problem,' said Brynn. And then, stilted, she added, 'It was nice, yes.'

He took a step toward her, and she took a step back. He reached out and took her by the waist and pulled her closer. 'Maybe we should . . .' he began, and leaned down to kiss her on her neck. She'd always liked it when he did that. But instead of melting into him, he felt her go rigid and wriggle her way out of his embrace. When their eyes met, he saw a flash of disgust, of pity.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'I'm not ready. It makes me uncomfortable.'

Humiliation coursed through his veins, bathing his brain in violence. He considered taking what he wanted from her regardless of how she felt or what she wanted. She was his wife, goddammit. This was her duty. The thought of forcing her, knowing how wrong it was, only made him feel worse, more helpless. Brynn was turning him into a bad man. It was her fault. That's what Mary was always telling him. He was good, good, good. The world was bad, bad, bad.

He wanted to say something to cut through Brynn's force field of self-possession; he wanted to wound her, to leave her reeling with his words the way she had with hers, but all he could muster was a petulant mimic, a childish echo. '*Uncomfortable*,' he spat in his best French accent, and pushed past her to the front door, slamming it behind him and waking up Jenny.

Chapter Ten

After she got Jenny back to sleep, Brynn drew herself a bath as hot as she could bear and watched her skin turn deeper shades of red as she sank, inch by inch, into the tub. Eventually only her eyes and nose remained above the surface. She wished she could dissolve.

She had tried tonight, for Jenny, to take a step back toward the life they'd had before. But Eric had wanted more than she could give – more than she would ever want to give again, she realized. And she'd seen the anger burning in his eyes, the pulsing in his jaw.

'I am uncomfortable,' she said aloud, the word that Eric had mocked, throwing her pronunciation back in her face. *Ahn-com-for-taab-luh* – five syllables with the power to send her husband into a rage.

'I am uncomfortable,' she tried again. Was that closer to the English? Could her ears even tell?

She inhaled a deep breath of the steamy air and looked down at her body under the water, rippled and distorted, and tried to remember what it had felt like to say that word before her fall. Again, she tried, 'I. Am. Un-compftor-bul. Uncompftorbul. Uncompftorbul!' That was it, wasn't it? She'd done it! Shaved off a syllable. She could do it. She just needed to remember how the words used to *feel*, right? Where to put her tongue and what shape to make with her mouth? 'Uncompftorbul,' she said again, a whisper, but then she promptly clamped a wet hand over her mouth. She would not kill this second soul.

The next few days were even more tense, even more *uncompftorbul* than before her attempt at normalcy. Because now they both knew that

there was no going back. She knew that Eric had sensed that the changes in her ran deeper than the sounds that came out of her mouth, but she'd shown him now that she would fight for these changes, that she would not sacrifice herself for him.

But Eric had his own secrets, too, she knew. His own demons and desires. She thought about all that he'd admitted to her; and how it hadn't upset her. If anything, it had only unrolled a few more lengths of chain allowing her to swim a little farther away from the buoy of their marriage. And then there was the piece of wood. She'd glimpsed it on his bed when she walked by the spare room, and she'd heard strange sounds coming from his room late at night. What *was* that about? She couldn't shake the feeling that whatever madness was brewing in Eric's mind, whatever would compel him to, what – form a *relationship*? – with an inanimate object, was her fault. She'd pushed him to the brink. How? By speaking differently? The smallness of it blew her mind. But even the tiniest splinter could stop people in their tracks. The atom bomb was just . . . atoms.

She couldn't sleep. She was thinking about what Lisa had said to her the last time they saw each other. *You never wanted any of this, Brynn*, Lisa had spat at her, *and you never deserved it.* Tossing and turning in her bed, Ginger eyeing her watchfully from her own bed on the floor, Brynn felt the truth of Lisa's words churning in her gut. Was it possible to love someone, and not want them? Was it possible to create something that you don't deserve? Because if she was brutally honest with herself, it wasn't only Eric who was asking her for more than she could give – it was Jenny, too. Guilt gnawed at her.

It was then that an idea floated into the room and landed on her restless chest like a bird entering a nest. It wasn't perfect, but it was an emergency exit from a burning building, a chance at survival: she would convince Eric to call a truce. He could keep his secrets, his piece of wood and his women, if that's what he wanted. And in return, he'd stop asking her to fix herself. It wasn't enough, she knew, and she wasn't sure how long it could last. It was a flimsy, short-term fortification. But for Jenny, they would have to try for a ceasefire. It

needed to happen *now*.

She'd wake him up if she had to. But when she approached the guest room, Ginger at her heels, she saw the flickering blue light of the television through the crack under the door. He was still awake. She paused, considering the man in the room beyond.

Something that he emitted still tugged at her, although weakly, like a song on the radio full of static that still managed to transmit a lyric here, a melody there, before succumbing to white noise. She knocked gently as she opened the door, peering into the room. Eric was propped up on a stack of pillows, gazing dumbly at the television, his hand resting on the piece of wood which he'd placed on the pillow next to him. It looked to Brynn like a sleeping, curled-up cat. The sight of it disgusted her, but she swallowed it down. If this was going to work, their mutual disgust would have to cancel the other's out.

'What,' he said without shifting his eyes away from the screen.

'I think we should talk,' Brynn said quietly, and saw him wince at the sound of her accent.

Eric pointed the remote at the television and began to click through channels. She stared at him. She could still see the man who had charmed her all those years ago, who'd flirted with her when she was a waitress, who'd rushed to buy her clothes for the mere chance of spending some more time with her. She had stood in front of this man, hands in his, and promised to love him forever, until death did them part. But what exactly did *death* mean? The vow was too vague, or perhaps there was some small print, terms and conditions that she'd failed to read, because there *had* been a death, hadn't there? The Brynn who'd said *I do* had died when she fell, had never made it back from wherever she'd been.

He continued to studiously ignore her, but didn't ask her to leave.

'What do we do, Eric? We can't stay like this forever.'

'*We can't stay like zis forevuur*,' he said, mocking her again. Sitting up straight, pivoting his body toward her, he smiled a jackal's smile and said, 'Tell me this, Brynn, my wife, my love, the mother of my child, are you doing it on purpose now? You are, aren't you? Just tell me – your secret's safe with me. There's no one listening, it's just us. Admit it, Brynn. You could have stopped this a long time ago. In fact, I haven't read of a single case lasting as long as yours. You kind

of tried the other night, a little more practice, a little more trying, and you could change back if you wanted to, right? But you don't want to. You're enjoying this.'

She regarded him for a few long, electrified moments. She had come here to make peace, to offer them a way to coexist. But he was so arrogant. So hardened against her. She knew at that moment that he would never agree to her terms. He would never want her in any form that wasn't the woman she'd been when they met: pliable, grateful, dutiful. A woman who no longer existed. So instead, jutting her chin toward the volute on the pillow, arching her brow, she asked, 'Are you doing *this* on purpose?'

'What the fuck are you talking about,' Eric said, but his voice was edged with panic.

'You think I don't know that you love this thing,' she flung her hand toward it dismissively, 'this piece of fucking wood? You think I don't know that you talk to it? I hear you, Eric. These walls are thin.' Narrowing her eyes, she added, 'You think I don't know you fuck it, Eric? How do you do it exactly? I don't see an opening. Do you just rub yourself against it like a fucking animal?' It had not been what she'd come to say, but the pleasure of the cruelty bursting out of her, allowing herself the fullness of her anger, felt . . . wonderful. But the thrill was short-lived.

In a split second, Eric was up and inches from her face. Ginger growled, but Eric didn't seem to notice. Brynn saw the current of rage ripple through his body, all the tendons in his neck taut and throbbing. It was rage like no other she'd seen in him before. It was a bullet in the chamber. It was the premeditation and the intent you heard about in the news. *He could kill me*, she thought, with primal clarity. His wild eyes, his flared nostrils, his balled fists, his ragged breath . . . all of these things told her that he was thinking the same thing, turning it over in his mind, imagining it, *wanting* it, fighting it. With visible effort, he managed to spit two words at her: '*Get. Out.*'

Brynn stood in front of the bathroom mirror, mesmerized by the tremor vibrating through her. *It's just adrenaline*, she told herself,

logically, but still – her physiological reaction to Eric's fury fascinated her. Her hands were shaking. Her teeth were chattering. Her eyes burned but remained dry. Her face and chest were mottled red. She felt like a rabbit who had looked into the jaw of a wolf and managed somehow to escape. *Fight or flight? Fight or flight?*

What nobody ever seemed to want to talk about, Brynn thought as she brought her body under control, was that the fall could have killed her. *I could have fucking died that night.*

She remembers the moment she slipped – not that anyone asks her about it – that portentous moment after her foot had slid on the icy stairs but before she'd landed on the cold, hard ground . . . while she was midair, and time had slowed down just long enough for her to have a single thought. She wished she could say that thought was of Jenny, or of Eric. But the thought – which was more of a revelation, a blinding flash bomb of truth before the blackness took her, before the coma and the parts of her brain responsible for language reconfigured themselves – was: *I've been living the wrong life, goddammit, and now it's over.*

But it wasn't over.

She didn't die.

She danced in all her possible skins on the ever-changing Field of Now.

She woke up – altered, yes, but alive!

But nobody wanted this version of her. Nobody, except perhaps Jenny. But eventually Jenny would reject her, too. Or if not reject, then resent. Because no child wants a mom who doesn't fit in, who by holding herself apart only draws attention to herself, and by default to the child, too. But Brynn didn't know what to do with this idea. She recalled the summer's day they'd spent in the warm sunshine, just the two of them, Jenny dashing with Ginger through the sprinkler. She had felt peace with her daughter then; a sense that they'd do better on their own, that Jenny couldn't care less how Brynn sounded when she spoke. What would their lives look like if it were just the two of them? Brynn knew now that she couldn't remain under the same roof as Eric. She imagined moving out of the Matador Street house, getting a job somewhere – doing what, she had no idea – and renting a little apartment. She felt a jolt at the thought that there would be no big

backyard to run through sprinklers in, under the shade of the sugar maple tree. She'd be lucky to find somewhere that allowed dogs. Her ability to imagine a life alone with Jenny wavered. She thought about shared custody with Eric – who, she understood, she'd never really untangle herself from as long as they were both raising Jenny. And poor Jenny, being ferried back and forth between them, an exhausted emissary, her little backpack filled with her favourite books and stuffed animals.

Fight or flight? Fight or flight?

Why should she fight for these people – Eric, Lisa, her parents? If they'd known she would wake up so different to the woman she'd been before, would they have preferred she'd died? They'd never admit it, but she wondered about it all the time. She imagined them all draping themselves dramatically over her coffin, beating their chests, lamenting her death. *Gone too soon!* they'd cry. *Taken from us in an instant!* But what Brynn understood now was that for all their grieving and hair-pulling, they would have at least had the memory of her that they preferred. She would have been preserved like a fly in amber – the wife, mother, daughter and friend that they understood, that they knew how to love.

Get out, Eric had commanded. She knew that he meant *get out* of his face, of his room, of within reach of the hands that wanted to strangle the life out of her. But she couldn't help but interpret his words as something more – an unshackling, a release, an opportunity.

Fight or flight? Fight or flight?

Hands still shaking, she sat down on the soft cushion covering the toilet seat. She'd picked out this toilet seat cover. She'd chosen its sage-green color and its terry cloth fabric. She'd chosen it to match the little carpet that fitted around the toilet and the bath mat spread across the tile floor; cream-colored hexagons which she'd also chosen, whose grout she scrubbed with a toothbrush. The proof of her existence was all over this house, she thought. Scanning the bathroom, she spied one lone pubic hair caught in her razor, strands of her curly auburn hair nested in her hairbrush, her DNA splattered on the mirror in toothpaste flecks. She was baked in. Stuck to the walls like an ant that had been accidentally stuck under a coat of paint. Was it even possible to extract herself from this room, let alone this house, let alone the people who

she shared it with? But the shadow question nagged her: was it possible *not* to?

If she was ever going to genuinely be able to offer her daughter anything real, she reasoned, anything beyond the make-believe they'd been playing since Brynn came home from the hospital, Brynn needed to figure out who she was, what she wanted, how to live fully in this new self she'd been gifted, her second soul. She thought of her mother's moldering box of ballet shoes and tutus in the basement, rotting and disintegrating. Brynn did not want to rot and disintegrate, and if she stayed in this house, she would. She was already unspooling rapidly . . . how long until she was threadbare?

Fight or flight? Fight or flight?

Getting up from the toilet seat she returned to the sink and splashed cold water on her face, leaned in close to the mirror. Closer, until her nose touched the cold glass. Closer, until she pressed her lips against her own reflection. Closer, as if she could reach inside the mirror and pull her truest self across some invisible threshold, but instead, all she could do was try to hear what it was telling her. She pressed her ear and cheek against the mirror, closed her eyes, and listened. *You're only twenty-seven years old*, her true self told her. *It's not too late to start over. You were Brynn Plover, and then you were Brynn Mitchell. You can be a different Brynn again.*

She had the strange sensation of being dipped in a warm coating of resolve, like a strawberry into melted chocolate, a soft, fleshy thing made hard. A membrane of will, of purpose, shielded her like armor.

Brynn found Ginger asleep in her bed. She kneeled down and embraced her, committing her earthy smell to memory. '*Merci*,' she said as she kissed her on the head, 'I'm sorry.'

After that, it was easier than she thought it would be.

Easier than she'd hoped it would be.

Brynn chose flight.

Part Three

Chapter Eleven

‘Wait, stay still,’ Jenny commanded Kimber while Yolanda repositioned the ring light. Kimber froze comically, her mouth open, one eye closed. Post Malone droned in the background and a plume of perfumed smoke floated into frame from the cone of Palo Santo incense Kimber had lit to cloak the scent of the mango vape she had promised her parents she’d stopped smoking.

The three of them had just torn through Elderpool’s vintage clothing stores and charity shops, and were trying on new outfits from the pile of threads they’d dumped on the floor. Kimber was sucking in her midriff, which floated, pale and freckled, between a cropped MTV t-shirt and a burgundy corduroy miniskirt. Mustard-yellow tights and knee-high black Doc Martens finished off the nineties look they were going for, and Kimber wanted a selfie – if you could call a three-person photo shoot with semi-professional lighting in a corner of her bedroom a selfie.

Lisa was constantly telling Jenny how funny it was that she and all her friends were dressing the way that they used to, back in the nineties. *They*, Jenny knew, meant Lisa and her mother, even if Lisa never said so. But Jenny didn’t want to think about Lisa or her mother now; one so unfathomably distant, the other insistently, claustrophobically close.

‘Unfreeze,’ Jenny said. ‘Turn a little more to the side and point your foot.’ Kimber followed directions.

‘Maybe put one hand in your pocket,’ Yolanda added, looking up from her own phone.

‘Like this?’ asked Kimber.

‘Perfect,’ Jenny said. ‘Okay, now tilt your chin down and look up.’

Kimber arranged her face into an expression of serene boredom, her lips slightly parted with the hint of a smile that could easily be

mistaken for a smirk, while Jenny took a series of photos. The three girls repeated the sequence twice more, for Jenny and Yolanda. When they were satisfied with the images, the three of them sat on the floor while Kimber and Yolanda ran theirs through various filters and photo-editing apps until they were poreless, thigh-gapped, slightly taller, plumped in some places, reduced in others, ever so slightly enlarging their eyes until they looked almost alien.

Kimber and Yolanda posted their pictures onto various accounts, while Jenny watched *Gilmore Girls* clips on TikTok. She wasn't allowed to post anything remotely sexy or, as her dad would say, *misleading*, on social media. She still enjoyed taking the photos, sending the ones she liked best to Lucas. But she wasn't as obsessed with this stuff as Kimber and Yol. She was happy to lose herself in the world of Stars Hollow, Connecticut, imagining her way into Lorelai and Rory's kitchen – all sunflower yellows and sweet-pea greens. Jenny's obsession with the more than twenty-year-old show was a source of gentle ribbing from Kimber and Yolanda, and Jenny tried to play it off as something she watched ironically. And maybe it was ironic for Jenny, of all people, to transport herself into a world where mothers and daughters were as close as sisters, and dads were superfluous.

She was rewatching one of her favorite scenes: Lorelai and Rory eating cheeseburgers at the diner while Lorelai told Rory about the premonitions she'd been having about her death. Jenny laughed a little to herself when Lorelai recounted a dream where she'd been eaten alive by a turtle. She didn't notice the look Kimber and Yol exchanged, the look they'd been exchanging about Jenny for as long as they could remember, the look the mothered exchanged when in the presence of the unmothered.

A few hours later, the three girls had jumped the cold metal railings and were huddled on the large, flat slabs of concrete and rock next to the wide-open mouth of an enormous drainpipe, out of sight of the old people with walkers and moms with strollers who made laps around

the park above them. It was a cold October afternoon and the icy wind whipped around them, turning their noses red and making their eyes water.

Jenny had planned on going home after Kimber's to work on her college essay. She hadn't yet made a start on it, and the looming due date nipped at her heels – but when Lucas and the guys had texted them to meet at the lake, she was happy to put it off a little longer. She didn't know where to start with the essay anyways, couldn't find a foothold with the theme: *The Spirit of Our Times.* The words sparked a fireworks display of overlapping images in her mind, mostly things she'd seen on YouTube and TikTok.

The apple-cheeked fury of a teenage girl begging the old guard to wake up: *How dare you?*

The gentle giant on the ground, a knee on his neck, pleading for his life: *I can't breathe.*

The child's voice calling from her classroom while shots ring out: *Please hurry, please hurry, please hurry*.

Battle cries on the steps of the courts, on the streets of capitals and in the halls of power.

Masked doctors sobbing on the news.

Rockets launching over homeless encampments.

Guns and flags and fires and floods.

But how could she write about any of that? What would she say? Everything she knew was secondhand information; what did she really *know*? She'd never been out of the country. She'd never even been out of the Midwest. The farthest from home she'd traveled was to see her family on her dad's side in Ohio, and that had just felt like Michigan but with endless fields instead of endless lakes. Jenny got good grades in history, and she knew the world had always been at war, that human beings had been doing terrible things to each other forever. But she suspected *The Spirit of Our Times* had something to do with the feeling she had that all the violence and the fury was becoming . . . uncontainable. Her dad would say apocalyptic, but she didn't believe in God.

Whenever Jenny and her friends discussed the state of the world, one of them would always end up saying, 'We don't deserve our planet, it's time for the aliens to come and take over,' and then one of

them would invariably quote *The Simpsons*, 'I for one welcome our new alien overlords.' But Jenny wasn't always sure there was such a big difference between the God her father believed in and the aliens she and her friends preferred. In both cases, she figured, we'd proven ourselves unworthy, and the angry man – or the little green men – were going to have to come down from the sky and take it away from us.

She was about to ask Kimber and Yolanda if they'd started their essays, if they had any clue what the Spirit of Our Times was, when they heard the telltale sounds of skateboards on concrete, and seconds later Lucas, Trent and Adam had joined them, dressed more sensibly than the girls in jeans, hoodies and beanies. Lucas sat behind Jenny and she sank back into his warmth, his knees flanking her.

'Zip me up with you!' she told him, and he scooched in close enough for her to get under his sweatshirt and pop her head out just below his.

'You look like a two-headed monster.' Yolanda laughed, glancing quickly at Trent to see if he planned any similar hoodie-chivalry. He didn't. Kimber pretended not to notice Adam, but Jenny could tell she was hoping he'd pay attention to her by the way her eyebrows shot up to her hairline, trying so hard to give off *unbothered* vibes that she looked deranged.

Jenny and Lucas had been together since they were fourteen, their first frisson a snap-crackle-pop of mutual recognition over the splayed frog carcass they were dissecting together in biology class. The commingling of their pulsing youth with absolute, revolting death had worked a kind of magic on them, propelling them toward each other: *Quick! Before it's too late!* Now, at seventeen, they were practically an old married couple. Their relationship gave them a kind of status in their group, like they were the parents in charge of everyone. But lately, Jenny had been feeling stifled by Lucas. Or, rather, stifled by the expectation that she and Lucas would continue to be together after high school, after she managed to get away from Elderpool.

'Come on, come on, get in tight,' Lucas commanded, and the six of them closed into a tight circle. Jenny and Kimber made eye contact as Kimber's leg pressed against Adam's and Kimber made a furtive *don't you dare say anything* face. Jenny looked away dutifully and changed

the topic. ‘Roll it up!’

‘Already did,’ Trent said heroically, his pockmarked face beaming with pride as he procured a fat grub of a joint from inside his beanie.

‘Then light that shit up!’ Jenny and Lucas said in unison. The others burst out laughing at their synchronicity, a frequent occurrence that always produced a warm, safe feeling in Jenny.

‘You guys spend way too much time together,’ said Yolanda, the weak, overcast sunlight glinting off her braces and nose ring.

‘Yeah,’ said Trent as he held a lighter to the end of the joint and inhaled, ‘you’re neglecting your other friends.’ He made a faux-sad face and passed the joint to Kimber, who inhaled deeply and then passed to Yol, who exhaled directly into Trent’s mouth. As Trent inhaled he placed a hand on Yol’s thigh. They were together, too, but not as publicly as Jenny and Lucas. Trent didn’t really show her any affection in front of anyone outside their little group. For their part, Kimber and Adam avoided eye contact, even as the sides of their bodies fused together against the cold.

Minutes later, they were stoned and silent. The ring of their bodies had unclasped to allow them to lean against the wall behind them and stare out at the water.

Jenny was so stoned.

So, so stoned.

A fine, misty rain had started to fall, glazing their faces so that they looked to Jenny like lacquered dolls. Why, she wondered, was it in moments like this that she always had the strangest thoughts? Like, did islands go all the way down to the ocean floor, like teeth rooted in gums? Or were they floating . . . rootless, unmoored? What did blind people dream about? Or, how could Lisa handle her dad’s obsession with that stupid piece of wood? And, what was her mother (who she really, *really* didn’t want to think about, especially right now, but who she was always, *always* thinking about) doing right this moment?

Of this last question she had at least some idea, because she had a secret. She’d received a DM on Instagram.

Chapter Twelve

‘Brynn was scouted at Charles de Gaulle, literally minutes after she landed, waiting for her luggage.’ Tariq tilted his champagne flute toward her in admiration. ‘If that’s not fate, what is?’ A murmur of agreement swept around the table. Brynn caught Jillian’s glance and they shared a brief, conspiratorial eye-roll at the raw sentimentality. Brynn sipped her champagne contentedly; it had been twelve years since she’d had mid-range chardonnay with ice cubes.

‘Fate, perhaps,’ Brynn said, her hand on Tariq’s knee under the table, ‘but we all know Tariq is a romantic.’ There was another murmur of agreement. ‘I prefer to think of it as sheer luck. Right place, right time.’

‘Okay, okay, it does not matter.’ Tariq placed his hand on top of hers. ‘What matters is that you are here now. And tonight, we celebrate you and the life you are creating, even if that means you cannot drink *too* much more of this amazing champagne!’

‘Hear, hear!’ Brynn and her closest friends in her chosen country were seated at a round table in her favorite restaurant in the third arrondissement, just a few blocks from the home she and Tariq shared. They had chosen the area for its cool cafés and trendy shops, for its proximity to the Musée Picasso and modern, edgy galleries. Yes, it was one of the more touristy parts of Paris, but back then Brynn had been a kind of tourist, and Tariq had loved being her tour guide through its cobbled streets and its Renaissance architecture – the hand-cut stone, the sloping roofs, towers and turrets, all dripping in ivy. They loved nothing more than to stroll through its secret gardens with Lola, their beloved weimaraner, who they’d adopted as a puppy two years into their relationship. Privately Brynn ached for Ginger, but she didn’t feel entitled to complain. Still, the first time Tariq had proposed they adopt a dog, she’d declined, offering vague excuses. But when

he'd sent her a picture of the litter his friend's dog had just delivered, she'd caved at the sight of Lola's silver velvet coat and her aquamarine eyes. After they collected her, they'd been a happy family of three for nearly a decade and didn't expect that to change, until it did.

Her pregnancy had been a surprise to them both, and they hadn't stopped feeling an overwhelming sense of gratitude from the moment Brynn missed her period. She was acutely, almost uncomfortably aware of her happiness. Little Sabine, six months in utero, somersaulted inside her. Brynn placed Tariq's hand on her belly to feel the little pulses, the otherworldly undulations. She could tell by the way he smiled with his eyes and not with his mouth that it was real joy he was feeling.

She'd been adamant that she didn't want a frou-frou baby shower, but of course they'd insisted on doing something, and she was happy they had. She loved all of these people so much. While they ate chocolate gateau, she observed and absorbed them. There was Tariq, of course – the love of her life. And there was Jillian Bauer, her closest friend and her agent. The others – Dani, Pascale, Henri, Faisal, Marielle, Sylvie and Jacques – were colleagues and neighbors, artists and professors, barre buddies and friends of friends who'd become her friends, her people. They all knew her story, of course. *The Woman Who Woke Up from a Coma Speaking French* had been news that had made a moderate splash – when it wasn't roundly mocked – in France all those years ago. But it had made her a minor celebrity, given her a bit of cachet, and though none of Brynn's friends would admit to it, they often told people outside of their little circle, with a note of self-importance, that they knew Brynn . . . Brynn the ex-American . . . yes, the coma one, yes, the one who was now the face of La Belle Visage . . . yes, the one who looked like an auburn-headed Audrey Hepburn. Yes, she was now married to Tariq Tahiri, yes, the famous photographer . . . yes, they were expecting. What of the other husband? The other daughter? The other life? Of this they knew very little . . . of this, Brynn rarely spoke.

The story of her having been scouted at the airport as soon as she arrived in Paris was also a bit of a myth, but it was one that Brynn and Jillian allowed. The little embellishments added a bit of flourish to the story, and anyway, there was a seed of truth in it. In actual fact, Jillian

and Brynn had met on the plane to Paris; Brynn at the window, Jillian on the aisle, an empty seat between them on which they both dropped identical paperback copies of the same book: *The Secret*. Brynn had picked it up in the airport. She'd seen it around for a few years, on *Oprah*, at Lisa's, but she'd never read it. It was such an un-Eric book, something he would have called woo-woo on a good day and demonic on a bad one, and buying it on the occasion of her departure had felt momentous and transgressive. Jillian's copy was visibly well-read, dog-eared and with post-it notes poking out in all directions. Brynn desperately wanted to know the kind of woman who really understood *The Secret*. Sure, Lisa had tried to talk to her about self-development and signed her up to various newsletters. But from Lisa it had all seemed so desperate and silly – and Brynn had always unsubscribed.

Over individual bottles of pinot grigio, they discussed the Law of Attraction. They discussed the universe, not string theory and dark matter, but rather Jillian spoke of *frequencies* and *energies* and of the importance of *tapping in* to the right ones. The ideas did something to Brynn, unshackled her from some portion of the guilt she was feeling. It was easier to think of Jenny, waking up at home to discover that Brynn had left her (*not forever, just for a while*) when she told herself that she was in the process of tuning in to her unlimited potential, that she was manifesting the life she was always meant to lead. How could she be doing wrong, when her plan – she told herself in that moment – was to become who she was meant to be, and then immediately retrieve Jenny? In a way, she was doing this *for* Jenny. She just had to harness her thoughts, focus on what she wanted, and manifest. Right? *Right?* Fuck. She wasn't sure yet. By their third bottle, she confessed to Jillian.

'So, right now,' Jillian recapped, 'you are leaving them.'

'*Oui*.'

'Your parents.'

'*Oui*.'

'Your husband.'

'*Oui*.'

Pause.

'Your daughter?'

Pause.

‘*Oui*.’

‘We are going to need more wine. And you are going to need a friend.’

‘*Oui*.’

Of course, this whole conversation had been in French and Jillian had just assumed that Brynn was as French as she was, or perhaps, due to the little quirks of accent she couldn’t quite make out, Québécoise, until Brynn told her that part of the story, too. Jillian never judged her. When Brynn said that she’d just needed some time to get to know herself properly, that she would go back for Jenny as soon as she felt solid ground beneath her feet, Jillian had said, ‘Oh, I’ve got some more books you should read, I’ll lend them to you.’

But, in the lulls between their conversation, when Jillian would get up to stretch her legs or use the lavatory, Brynn’s misgivings about what she was doing blossomed like an exploding mushroom cloud, which was what she knew she’d just unleashed on Jenny. Because Jenny didn’t understand the universe yet, or the Law of Attraction, or manifesting and unleashing your inner power. Jenny only understood Brynn, and would never understand her absence. Brynn hadn’t worked out a way to explain that part yet.

A few hours earlier, a flight attendant whose bubbly demeanor was undermined by the fatigue around her eyes had pointed out all of the emergency exits, talked them through all the ways they might escape the plane if need be. Brynn had had to stifle a rueful laugh; the plane *was* her emergency exit. If this didn’t work and she found herself hurtling down the inflatable slide or treading water with her seat-turned-flotation device, she’d simply have to try to swim the rest of the way to France; she had no plan B.

She gazed out of the airplane window into the total blackness, punctuated only by the occasional flash of the lights on the wings. Anyone who thought blood was thicker than water had obviously never flown over the ocean; its ceaseless, rolling vastness gave kinship a run for its money. Even if she couldn’t see it, she knew that there was nothing below her but dark, endless fathoms. Examining her emotions more closely, she admitted to Jillian that she felt the peculiar pain of not feeling *more* pain, the guilt of not feeling guilty enough.

‘Is there a word for that?’ she asked Jillian.

'*Weltschmerz*,' Jillian answered. 'My dad's German. It means a kind of guilt for feeling happy, because the world is painful . . . it's hard to translate.'

'*Weltschmerz*,' Brynn whispered, and slept the rest of the way to Paris.

As the plane taxied to its arrival gate, Jillian admitted that the first thing she had noticed about Brynn was her beauty. As Brynn blushed, Jillian told her that it was a beauty that demanded noticing. Jillian couldn't believe that Brynn had never modeled and didn't have an agent – but by the time they disembarked, she did: Jillian herself. The rest *was* rather mythic in proportion . . . which was why the women allowed for the small discrepancy in Tariq's retelling of the story around the table that night. Brynn had not been scouted by La Belle Visage Cosmetics™ at the airport as such, but the speed with which Jillian secured the LBV contract was remarkable – and perhaps, as Tariq liked to see it, fated, written in the stars. He had taught her the word for it in Arabic: *maktouba*.

The contract was also the answer to a fundamental question that had dogged Brynn from the moment she left the Matador Street house. Namely, when would Eric cut her off from their family bank account? The account into which she had never made a deposit, only deductions. She knew he would be able to see the purchases she made – the taxi to the airport, the plane ticket, the copy of *The Secret* in the news kiosk. She got the impression that he was happy to foot the bill for her departure. He wanted her gone, and he'd pay for it if he had to. But for how long? The immediacy of the work she'd landed solved that problem.

LBV were serendipitously looking to do something iconically iconoclastic; to select a new face that (gasp!) was not already a famous actress and who (gasp!) had done no previous modeling and (gasp!) was not even French! Brynn, *entrez-vous s'il vous plaît*. And, for the gods' grand finale, Tariq Tahiri, the famed photographer and notorious seducer who was known for his commitment to bachelorhood. Tariq, training his lens on Brynn's face, focusing and refocusing, noting the

elegance with which she bore her discomfort, felt for the first time in his life, not love – not yet, that came later – but a kind of instantaneous fidelity.

'I like the story of your face,' were the first words Tariq had said to Brynn at that initial photo shoot, projecting his voice across the dark, empty space between where he hid behind his Nikon and where she sat perched atop a barstool, shimmering under a blaze of scrimmed and refracted light. She couldn't help but compare it with the first thing Eric had ever said to her a lifetime ago, when she was a waitress at Buster's: *Hey*. The comparison between their opening salvos was an injection of pride straight into her bloodstream. For her to tether herself to someone again, they would need to see the story on her face, to want it, all of it, unredacted and unabridged. Not the Cliffs Notes bullet-pointed cheat sheet Eric had preferred: *Brynn For Dummies*.

That was so long ago.

Jillian, Tariq, La Belle Visage had all complicated Brynn's original timeline, and so she had extended her travel plans until she could no longer say that she was traveling.

Twelve years.

Twelve years since Brynn had kissed a sleeping almost-five-year-old on her forehead, and crept like a criminal, passing for the last time under the shadow of the American flag, into the taxi waiting outside like a getaway car.

Twelve years since Eric, holding his volute on his lap, sat in his chair in the darkened living room and watched her go, without a word.

There *were* words, of course, just not the right ones.

'Hello.'

'Hello.'

'How are you?'

'The fuck you care.'

'Can I speak to her?'

'Fuck you.'

'Eric.'

'No.'

‘I am her mother.’
‘No, you’re not.’
‘Eric.’
Click.

And then, when Eric did finally put Jenny on the phone, Brynn found she didn’t know what to say.

‘Hi, Mommy!’
‘Hi, baby.’
‘Where are you?’
‘I’m in Paris.’
‘Can I come? Can Daddy?’
‘Maybe, sweetheart, someday.’
‘Are you coming home?’
‘How’s school, baby?’
‘Mommy, are you coming home?’
‘Someday, Jenny.’
‘But when?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘For my birthday?’
‘I don’t know, *chérie*.’
‘Mommy?’
‘What, honey?’

‘’Isper it.’ And at those words, the tears Brynn had forbidden herself broke loose and she could only manage a garbled, ‘What, honey?’ again, pretending not to have heard.

‘’Isper it, Mommy,’ Jenny repeated, and the incantation evoked a flashback of their snug routine, when all of the circuits between mother and daughter had been fused, of roasting chicken and warm, steaming laundry, of snow angels and snowmen with carrots for noses, of *Sesame Street* and ants-on-a-log and *W is for Whale who is Whispering!*

‘’Isper it, Mommy,’ Jenny said again, quietly. Jenny, who had become the whispering whale, sending signals across the ocean to her wayward mother . . . Jenny who could not grasp what she was; the

abandoned calf, the child left behind.

'I love you,' Brynn complied, and then the full-throated cry of her daughter shattered her anew.

'Do not call again.' Eric's voice, calm, quiet, threatening. And she didn't, not for many, many years. She told herself it was for Jenny's sake. With various intermediaries and over email, they finalized their divorce without a word passing between them.

Calls to her parents did not go much better. In the years since she'd left, Brynn had not once spoken privately to her father. Rather, Henry barked accusations and bits of information at Brynn from the background, which her mother repeated in unnecessary echo.

'SHE MIGHT LIKE TO KNOW THAT HER *BEST FRIEND* AND HER *HUSBAND* ARE LIVING TOGETHER!'

'Brynn, do you know that Lisa moved into the house?'

'Eric told me – well, he texted. I'm not surprised. Good for them, actually.'

'DOES SHE KNOW THAT JENNY HAD HER APPENDIX REMOVED? DOES SHE EVEN CARE?'

'Did you know that Jenny had her appendix removed? Do you even care?'

'No, I didn't know that –'

'No, Henry, she didn't know.'

'DOES SHE EVEN CARE?'

'Do you even care?'

'Yes, of course I do, Mom.'

'She cares, Henry, of course.'

'IS SHE STILL TALKING WITH THAT ACCENT?'

'Are you still –'

'*Mom*.'

'What?'

'I can hear him, and you are talking to me right now. You know the goddamn answer.'

'Language.'

'Indeed.'

‘What?’

‘Never mind.’

‘Yes, Henry, she is still talking with the accent.’

She and Lisa hadn’t spoken since months before Brynn left. Since Brynn had unmasked Lisa’s love for Eric, laughed at it, laughed at her, laughed at them all. They had said all they needed to say, and had not said all that they didn’t.

When Brynn first arrived in Paris, Jillian insisted she stay in her guest room. It was the most stylish apartment Brynn had ever seen outside the pages of a magazine. Jillian unfolded her Montmartre neighborhood for Brynn like one of the intricate pop-up books from her childhood, hidden worlds unfurling. She taught her to tie her scarf properly – wrapping a length of red silk around her neck, crossing the two ends at her nape, tying a loose knot at the depression between her clavicles, and then shifting the whole blossom to the side and doubling the knot: the French way. Scarved thusly, they took many long walks, Jillian pointing out landmarks and offering history lessons between their long *tête-à-têtes*. And with every walk and talk Brynn felt herself heal, relax, melt into her new surroundings like an animal who’d been raised in captivity being released into the wild for the first time. She was *home*.

Sometimes, she felt so good that she wondered if she’d gotten what she came for, and perhaps she should go back for Jenny now – renewed and energized. But she always discovered more reasons why she couldn’t go yet. Not when the Christmas lights had just blinked on in Paris, not when she was finding herself singing ‘*La Noël de la Rue*’ while she julienned haricots verts for her salade Niçoise for one, something which Eric would never have considered a proper meal. Not before Jillian took her for a stroll on the Promenade Plantée in the first snow of the year, followed by *vin chaud* at La Closerie des Lilas as she’d promised. Brynn was still manifesting, still tuning in to the

universe; she'd been reading Eckhart Tolle and she was *leaning in* to the *Power of Now*, and *now* was *here*, in France. She wanted *la vie en rose* . . . or at least, *la vie en rose* colored glasses. So she'd taken more time.

A secret: on the occasion of her second ultrasound, when both Tariq and her normal doctor were unavailable, Brynn had been seen instead by a Dr. Rousseau, who hadn't closely read her file. While listening to the watery echo of Sabine's heartbeat, looking at the puddle-shaped embryo tethered to her uterus, Dr. Rousseau had asked her if this was her first pregnancy, and Brynn had said yes. *Oui.* It had taken her a few disorienting seconds to realize she'd lied.

And then she thought about that accidental lie, the *oui* that was a *non*, a lot.

It wasn't like she'd forgotten about Jenny. Yes, it was true, sometimes many days might string together into a whole week where she didn't think about Jenny in any specific, intentional way. But Jenny was always with her . . . in the background, fuzzy and out of focus. Wasn't she? Had she become so out of focus that Brynn had forgotten – however fleetingly – that she'd ever given birth to her? That she'd carried her inside her body like she was carrying Sabine now? She searched herself, and she decided that maybe it wasn't entirely a lie. After all, when she'd had Jenny she was a completely different person; a person who was living in the wrong city, married to the wrong man, completely unprepared for motherhood. Not like now. Now, she was a woman who had made a name for herself, whose face was on billboards and in magazines, who was married to the actual love of her life, surrounded by friends who really knew her. She was forty, not twenty-two. No wonder she'd said Sabine would be her first, because in this life she was living now, it was true.

And then she thought about *that* for a while.

And what dawned on her was that she'd done it. She'd achieved that long-ago task she'd set for herself when she'd boarded the plane for Paris. That she would go back for Jenny as soon as she felt solid ground beneath her feet. And without even noticing, it seemed she had.

She'd found herself! *Here I am!* It had taken her longer than she'd originally intended, but she'd become the woman she was supposed to be and manifested the life she desired. And in this acknowledgment – amplified by the love hormones flooding her brain – she felt a kind of breezy space open up inside of her, as though she'd emptied a musty, forgotten room of old, broken furniture and clutter and all that remained was a carpet with perfect, untouched vacuum lines. There was room inside her again – finally, like she'd always said there would be – for Jenny.

So, after many years of silence, she had made a phone call.

'Eric.'

'Brynn.'

'It's been a long time.'

'You still sound French.'

'Well, I am, kind of. How are things with you?'

'Do you really care?'

'*Oui*, of course I do.'

'Things are fine, Brynn. Jenny is fine.'

'Okay. Good. Is she good?'

'She's a teenage girl.'

'What does that mean?'

'You wouldn't know.'

'I was one, once.'

'Yeah, I've heard.' A vicious half-laugh. 'She's not as bad as you were, thank God.' *Lisa, that bitch, cette salope*, Brynn thought. Of course she'd have shared all their secrets by now, doing her best to poison any remnant of respect for Brynn that Eric might have held on to.

'I'm sure I have Lisa to thank for that remark.'

'You have Lisa to thank for many things.'

'Such as?'

'Raising your daughter.' A shot across the bow. Shots that Brynn knew she was not entitled to return.

'I need to tell you something – well, not you, really, but there is something I'd like to share with Jenny. And I suppose that means sharing it with you, too.'

'Go ahead.'

‘You know I’m with Tariq, for many years now.’

‘The Muslim.’

‘The photographer, my partner.’

‘Your *partner*?’

‘Yes, Eric, my partner.’

‘Sounds gay when you say that.’

‘You sound ignorant when you say that.’

‘Fuck you.’

‘You sound *much* smarter now.’

‘Brynn, seriously, *oh my fucking God* you better get to the fucking point.’

‘I’m pregnant.’

Silence.

More silence.

‘Eric, I –’

‘Stop.’

Silence.

More silence.

‘Why do you want to tell Jenny?’

‘Because, this will be her little sister. They are sisters.’

Eric emitted what could only be described as maniacal laughter, for what seemed like many long minutes but was likely only seconds, laughter so raucous, so uproarious, that Brynn heard the familiar voice of Lisa calling from some part of the house, ‘What’s so funny?’

‘Nothing,’ Eric said, and his laughter ended abruptly, like a bucket of water dousing a flame, and he was suddenly grave. Brynn knew he was speaking to her, not to Lisa when he said, ‘Nothing, whatsoever, is funny. Ginger died, by the way, five years ago.’

Click.

For a moment after Eric hung up on her, she couldn’t breathe. Hot tears rushed to her eyes, and for a fleeting moment she could feel the warm weight of Ginger’s body draped across her own body as she lay in the snow, broken. An old, dormant fury uncoiled inside Brynn then. She saw Eric’s face, millimeters from her own, full of hate and disgust, telling her to get out. And she had. It had been so long since she’d needed anything from Eric, since he’d held any power over her, since his opinion had guided the choices she made. She had every right

to tell Jenny about Sabine, she thought as she took long, calming breaths. And Jenny had every right to know about Sabine. ‘Fuck him,’ Brynn whispered quietly to her belly – *baise le*. ‘We’ll tell her ourselves,’ she said, as she slid her finger deftly across the screen of her phone, and found Jenny_Mitchell_08 on Instagram.

Chapter Thirteen

Brynn had been gone for four months when Lisa found herself sitting on her couch in her apartment, her spoon scraping the bottom of a carton of Ben & Jerry's Phish Food, watching *Girls*. Both the ice cream and the television series had been a favorite of Brynn and Lisa's: the ice cream for its marshmallow swirl, and the show because it transported them to an alternate universe where twenty-somethings just like they'd been were living vivid, sweaty, complicated lives and making daring, delicious mistakes without consequences. Lisa often daydreamed about how different their lives would have been if they'd left Elderpool together after high school. If they'd moved to New York City and became bartenders in a trendy club, pouring shots for famous musicians. If they'd had questionable boyfriends and feral hangovers, taken hip-hop dance classes and watched the sun rise behind the Statue of Liberty. If they'd left together before Brynn met Eric, and before Eric got under Lisa's skin. It was far too late now for any of that, and she was out of ice cream to boot.

Lisa guessed that she was depressed, though she hadn't had an official diagnosis. Even though she hadn't seen Brynn for months before she left, she'd taken the news of her European migration hard. Things had gotten so bad between them. Lisa had been so angry with Brynn, since long before she'd had her fall. And just as Lisa had worried that singing *The Song* to Brynn at Jenny's fourth birthday party had somehow caused Brynn's accident, she couldn't shake the feeling that the last thing she'd ever said to Brynn – *you never wanted any of this, and you never deserved it* – had cast her out. Perhaps her words had power after all, more than she'd ever believed. Her anger and hurt was tinged with regret and shame. She felt like she was tied to a medieval torture rack, each limb being pulled in a different emotional direction: she deeply missed her best friend; she still yearned painfully

for Eric; she was furious at Brynn for abandoning Jenny; she was gutted that – even though they were angry with each other and had some repairing to do – Brynn hadn't thrown a pebble at her window the night she left and said, *Come with me*.

She was just about to stand up and toss the empty ice-cream carton in the garbage can when her phone rang: Eric.

'Hello?' she answered cautiously. The last time he'd called her it was to ask her to go and rescue Ginger after Brynn had fallen.

'Lisa!' he said. 'I'm so glad you answered.'

He was in a panic: he had to go out of town the next morning for a three-day work conference in Chicago; the plans he'd put in place for Jenny had fallen through, and the Plovers were away for a family funeral in Wisconsin while his own parents were too far away to help. Would she consider coming over that night and staying for a few days with Jenny? She would stay in the guest room. He could pay her for her time, and Jenny would love to see her, he assured her.

Lisa had jumped at the chance. She had eschewed the offer of payment, and arrived that evening while Jenny was mid-tantrum – over what, Lisa wasn't sure – but it was a tantrum that ebbed and flowed the entire time that she and Jenny were left on their own, subsiding only when Eric returned. She didn't feel she'd been very useful at all, aside from whittling down the enormous backlog of laundry and cleaning the bathrooms for what she assumed was the first time since Brynn had left. But still, Eric seemed to have found her presence valuable, and asked if she could stay a few more days, which turned into weeks, and then months.

Brynn's absence in the Matador Street house was loud and relentless, like an annoying, chain-rattling ghost. But instead of intimidating Lisa, this seemed to inject a strong surge of purpose through her, animating all of her tasks. The guilt she'd been nursing – that this had somehow been all her fault – didn't entirely subside, but she felt an almost divine calling propelling her forward, into the house that Brynn had left unattended. If, she told herself, she could care for these two people properly, if she could help them, if she could love them, then all of this pain might not have been so pointless after all. She would put it right. She would reset the bones that Brynn had smashed when she left.

When it became evident that Lisa was going to stay – if not for good, at least indefinitely – she and Eric sat down and, as he'd phrased it then: hammered out the basics. They'd made a plan about school pick-ups and drop-offs, Eric signed over Brynn's minivan into Lisa's name, and added her as an approved caregiver with Jenny's school and pediatrician. He'd explained to her that sometimes he had to work late or start early, depending on what was going on at Louey's – and they both agreed it wouldn't work if Lisa was working night shifts at the hotel. One of them had to be available at all times, and that person would be Lisa. So she'd quit her job at the hotel and landed a part-time job at Elderpool Plants & Seeds; three days a week during school hours. They hadn't really discussed the minutiae of housework, grocery shopping, cooking and laundry – but Lisa had simply assumed these were her duties and Eric didn't disavow her of that notion. She unsubscribed from the Boss Bitch newsletter. What good had it ever really done for her?

Eric had asked her what her rent was at her apartment. She'd told him it was three-fifty a week, and he'd told her she could pay one-fifty a week for the guest room. He'd said it with such an air of generosity that she'd just gone along with it. That, and the fact that when you've told yourself you want something – *someone* – more than anything else for so long, and you finally get that person, you don't ask questions, you don't ask for more, you just try your best to inhabit the gaps, to exist in the small interstitial spaces, so they don't change their mind.

To Lisa's surprise, her job at Elderpool Plants & Seeds quickly turned into a fully fledged passion, so unlike the catatonic stupor her job at the hotel had kept her in. She loved spending her days nurturing life, watering and weeding and fertilizing and repotting. She found that she enjoyed physical labor, that she slept better when her muscles were sore from a day spent hauling bags of potting mix or mulch over her shoulders. Her skin darkened a few shades from the sun, despite her wide-brimmed hat, and freckles appeared on her cheeks for the first time since she was a child. She began to see more of Porter's self-

assured features in the mirror when she brushed her teeth or twisted her hair – which had finally grown long enough – into a messy bun. She marveled at the new sparkle in her eyes, the new definition in her biceps. *You wouldn't recognize me*, she couldn't help saying to the Brynn who was still an ever-present feature of her thoughts. *Would you like me?*

Eventually, she asked Eric if he minded whether she tried her hand at a garden, suggesting that it might be nice for Jenny. He'd just shrugged and told her to do whatever she liked.

After much trial and error, she'd created a thriving veggie patch in their backyard, which she planted every spring and shepherded through an enriching fallow state every winter. Spring through fall, their front yard was an explosion of Michigan perennials: marigolds as yellow as egg yolk, delicate tangerine-colored nasturtiums, purple and white dianthuses whose petals reminded her of little Barbie doll dresses. Neighbors complimented her and occasionally asked her for advice. Over the years, missing her garden and flowers across the long, frozen winters, she'd become an indoor-plant person, too. A ficus here, a peperomia there, slowly at first so that Eric wouldn't object. Now, there were plants in every room, some of which required specialized knowledge to care for.

In the beginning she had tried to engage Jenny, buying her her own pink watering can, gardening gloves, shovel and trowel. She'd let her pick out seeds and even painted a simple wooden sign that read *Jenny's Garden*, which they drove into the dirt in a corner reserved for Jenny. But Jenny's interest was anemic, and the more Lisa tried to convince her it was a fun, rewarding activity, the more Jenny decided that it patently was not.

All the better for Lisa – she preferred to be alone in the garden, with her plants and flowers, which she was certain communicated to her in some ancient, non-verbal way. Next to her bed she maintained a small notebook where she kept a list of all the things she learned from plants:

Sometimes you simply outgrow your pot.

Too much of even the best things – sun, water, fertilizer – can be bad for you.

Some weeds don't deserve that reputation. Many are useful and beautiful, decide for yourself what a weed is in your own garden.

Some plants like coffee grounds. Some don't. Some like a lot of sun, some don't. Some tolerate a bit of abuse and neglect, some don't. At the end of the day, they're all plants – and none of these qualities are better or worse.

You can't make something grow faster.

Unfurling is a tender, delicate time.

Sometimes you have to cut off sick parts of a plant to save the healthy parts.

Little sunflower sprouts cling to their shells even as seedlings. They will let go when they're ready.

And while she tried to keep this part of her life separate from the ghost of Brynn, she was also acutely aware that her garden only existed because Brynn had left. If Brynn were still here, Lisa would never even have discovered the gardener inside her. And not only was the garden thriving, but so were Jenny and Eric. In this way, wasn't Brynn like root rot? Wasn't she the dead, diseased branch of an otherwise healthy tree? She'd done them all a favor by severing herself from the rest of them so that they could thrive. Or, perhaps Brynn – like many of Lisa's plants over the years – had simply outgrown her pot. Maybe she hadn't been created to thrive in this climate; like the short-lived cactus phase Lisa had gone through. Perhaps Brynn simply was not made for Michigan winters, found its soil too loamy. Lisa liked to think that everyone had ended up where they were meant to be, where they'd flourish: Eric and Jenny with her, here in Elderpool, and Brynn in France – doing whatever it was she did over there.

This didn't mean that there wasn't a period of adjustment. Jenny had cried and begged for Brynn for the better part of a year, pushing Lisa away from her, refusing her comfort. But Lisa didn't let it hurt her feelings or deter her from her purpose. She had decided that her strategy would be to serve her way into Eric and Jenny's hearts. Or, as one of the influencers she followed on social media phrased it: to give out the love you want to come back to you. She reasoned that if she

cooked enough warm, nourishing meals, baked enough blueberry muffins before dawn so that the two of them could wake up to the aroma of butter and sugar wafting through the house, if she could make sure Eric's work shirts were always ironed and cleaned, that Jenny's hair was always washed and brushed, that Ginger was always walked and fed, that one day Eric and Jenny would see her in a different light. That they would associate her with comfort, wellbeing and baked goods; that she would be indispensable, and they would love her – and eventually, with Jenny, it worked. For all her efforts, Lisa was finally rewarded with the feeling of Jenny's featherweight body crawling onto her lap for a hug, or her small hand in Lisa's as they crossed the street. But it was different with Eric.

She supposed they became friends, or perhaps more like coworkers who lived together. Their mutual job was Jenny, but there was no deeper connection, no desire on his part to get to know Lisa better. If they weren't discussing Jenny, they discussed the running of the household, or the weather, or other inane topics. They rarely talked about Brynn.

They'd had one conversation about Eric's ever-present coil of wood. He'd snapped at Jenny when she'd innocently rolled it down the hallway and he had immediately regretted it, apologizing profusely after Jenny had erupted in tears. Later that night Lisa had gingerly raised the topic and he said that it was like a good luck charm, was patently not demonic or unChristian, and that he'd prefer they not discuss it again, so they didn't. But Lisa came to have her own understanding of the wood. She sensed that for Eric it was like the pet rock she'd loved as a child; an inanimate object that had nonetheless taken on a personality. It didn't seem to cause any harm, and for many years she felt as if it absorbed his stress, helping him remain calm and steady. She wasn't so sure anymore, and lately the wood had felt like a more sinister presence. Sometimes, she got the feeling it was watching her.

After Lisa had been living with them for about a year, she and Eric had stayed up late one night watching *Die Hard 2* on television. Both of them had had a few more glasses of wine and bottles of beer than normal, and he had initiated sex with her. There was no better way to put it. There had been no flirting, no foreplay or preamble. He'd

simply looked at her a little differently as they made their way toward their respective rooms, and instead of saying goodnight and continuing to the end of the hall, he'd set the volute down on the carpet by her door, and followed her into the guest room.

It had been a wholly unromantic affair, but at the time she just kept telling herself: *This is what you wanted, this is what you wanted, this is what you always fucking wanted.* Neither of them undressed from the waist up. Eric had kept his eyes closed the whole time, never deviating from the missionary position; he had not kissed her, and was careful to pull out long before he needed to, jerking himself off onto her brand new blue flannel pajama top which she'd purchased with the Louey's family discount. Afterwards, neither of them quite knew what to say, and Eric, suddenly sheepish, mumbled awkwardly, 'Thank you,' as he hurried to put his pants back on. Lisa, trying to convince herself that she'd enjoyed it, said, 'You're welcome.'

Next time will be better, she'd told herself. They continued to sleep together from time to time after that, and while it had become less awkward the more familiar they became with each other, it never got *better*, not really. He had still never kissed her. It was always in the guest room, always with his wood nearby.

Lisa was, technically speaking, single. She was free to date, to have a relationship if she wanted. But she couldn't do that to Jenny, she told herself. She needed to be completely available to her, after all she'd been through. Better for Jenny to feel like the three of them were a family. And maybe, someday, Eric would come around – and Lisa wanted to be ready.

When Jenny was nine, her appendix burst. Eric was away for a three-day conference in Grand Rapids. Lisa and Jenny had been playing *Monopoly* at the kitchen table when Jenny suddenly curled in on herself, clutching at her stomach, saying that it hurt so bad, so so bad, and then she vomited all over her neatly organized stacks of *Monopoly* money. Lisa had wasted no time in rushing her to Elderpool General where Jenny was whisked away from her and underwent emergency surgery to remove her appendix. Later, in the recovery room, Lisa

stroked Jenny's arm as she lay there in a deep, anesthetized sleep. She pondered every single filament of hair on Jenny's head and deemed them all agonizingly precious.

The last time Lisa or Jenny had been in this hospital was when they were keeping vigil at Brynn's bedside. Did Jenny remember those endless days, coloring on the floor, eating the jello the nurses brought her, while her mom lay in a coma?

For the first time in a long time, Lisa had wondered what Brynn would do. How a mother – a *real* mother – would care for her scared, sick (*but okay! she's going to be okay!*) little girl. And then it struck her: fuck that. Brynn wasn't here. Brynn hadn't given Jenny a single thought when she left. The only thing that Brynn had ever given Jenny was life, and perhaps Lisa herself. Because it was Lisa who thought she was having a heart attack when Jenny was rolled away from her on a gurney. It was Lisa who wished there was a way she could trade places with Jenny – that all Jenny's pain and suffering could be transferred to her, because she would bear it, she would take it, no questions asked. And it was in that moment, as Lisa reached for Jenny's clammy forehead and gently brushed an errant strand of hair away from her fluttering eyelid, that she realized that her love for Jenny was enough. Was mother love. Was nothing at all to do with Brynn or Eric. It was pure.

When Jenny awoke – groggy and confused – her first word had been 'Lisa?' and Lisa felt her heart fuse with Jenny's. And, all these years later, her heart was still fused to Jenny, even though it seemed like Jenny was now trying to peel her off like a Band-Aid. Lisa couldn't recall the last time Jenny had hugged her or slipped her hand into Lisa's. And although Lisa knew that Jenny still needed her – in the way she might have needed a housekeeper, a chef and a chauffeur – it had been years since Lisa felt like Jenny had wanted her.

Yesterday afternoon, Jenny had come home reeking of pot, her eyes bloodshot slits, taken herself to the refrigerator and eaten an entire block of Monterey Jack cheese.

'You'd better use this before your dad gets home,' Lisa had said,

handing her some Visine. Jenny had thanked her, administered the eye drops, had a ridiculously long shower and then hidden herself away in her bedroom, where Eric didn't go these days. Lisa had busied herself baking Jenny cookies. She remembered how good fresh, gooey, hot-out-of-the-oven chocolate-chip cookies were when you were seventeen and stoned. She was trying, as she had been for years, to be on Jenny's side.

Later, Jenny emerged – hiding beneath big neon-blue headphones and an Elderpool High hoodie – long enough to grab a stack of the cookies and skulk back to her room. Jenny didn't say thank you to Lisa for covering for her, or for baking the cookies, or for all the love and compassion and good intentions that Lisa had baked *into* the cookies.

It smarted for a second, but then Lisa reminded herself that this was what all mothers of teenagers went through. She tried to recall how she'd behaved toward her own parents – toward adults in general – when she was Jenny's age. And at least Jenny had Lucas – he was a good kid. And Yolanda and Kimber. She was surrounded by good influences. Lisa tried to remind herself how much worse it could be; Jenny could be like Brynn had been, or she could be a heroin addict or a 'furry' – something she'd been reading about that morning. At least Jenny wasn't insisting she was a rabbit!

Lisa thought about all this as she crouched under the canopy of the sugar maple tree in the corner of the backyard. It was late in the afternoon and the October sun melted through the leaves, which had turned – as they did each year – into flames; sizzling reds and translucent oranges. She was spreading mulch over the crocus bulbs she'd just buried deep in a ring around the tree. She needed to get them in before the first frost, which, according to Hetty at Elderpool Plants & Seeds, was likely to come a little early this year. She swiped at a fly that grazed her sweaty forehead. She spread the last handful of mulch and stood up, took off her gardening gloves one finger at a time, and looked up into the blazing tree, which glowed like a kaleidoscope. This tree, at this time of year, always made her uneasy.

Privately, she called it the Brynn-tree. Brynn had loved this tree, and Lisa had a vivid memory of sitting under its green shade the first summer after Jenny was born, she and Brynn marveling at the baby's pale, wriggly body as she giggled in her diaper on a sun-dappled

picnic blanket. But in the fall months, when its crown matched the color of Brynn's own hair, it took on a more suspicious, lurking affect. Sometimes, Lisa got the sense that the tree spied on her for Brynn, that it sent her messages across the sea, detailing all of Lisa's shortcomings for Brynn's amusement. Other times, in unguarded moments, when Lisa found herself missing Brynn, she wondered if the sugar maple might consider passing along a simple hello. She'd been missing Brynn more and more lately, not that she could admit this to anyone. She supposed it had something to do with the fact that she'd begun to sense that she was outgrowing her purpose at the Matador Street house.

It was getting cold, and she needed to pee, but she found herself unable to move as she stared up at the luminous, shivering leaves. This, too, had been happening to Lisa more and more. A kind of freezing. She'd be washing dishes or unpacking grocery bags, vacuuming or folding laundry, and suddenly she'd just *freeze* – holding a sock in each hand in midair, on the precipice of being folded into each other – and she'd be simply unable to move. Like she was now, standing under the Brynn-tree immobile and dumbstruck, a woman on pause.

MOVE! she told herself again, and this time she managed to compel her limbs toward the house, up the stairs that Brynn had fallen down all those years ago. She tried to focus on her plans for the rest of the day. Usually, she loved these hours, when Eric was at work, Jenny was at school, and, until a few years ago, it would be only her and Ginger at home. In the beginning, Ginger had mourned Brynn considerably, refusing to eat, resisting any walks, declining to play fetch. The vet had put her on antidepressants, which seemed to help a little. But over the years, she took to Lisa, became her familiar, following her around, content in her company. In these hours, when she and Ginger were alone, she could convince herself that this was, indeed, her home. That she was, as Brynn's mom Dana had put it, the *woman of the house*.

It was an odd, old-fashioned phrase which Lisa had never heard before, uttered by a jittery, disapproving Dana during her first visit to the house after Lisa moved in. 'Dana,' Lisa had said anxiously, 'I'm sorry to ask you this. I know it's so hard, but would you like Brynn's

things? Her clothes and jewelry, stuff she didn't take? Eric wants me to get rid of it and I don't know what to do.' Dana had looked at her differently then, scrutinizing her, Lisa knew; judging her. Likely wondering what kind of woman moves in with her best friend's husband and child, angry that Dana's loss had been Lisa's gain. 'You're the woman of the house, Lisa,' she'd answered bitterly. 'You decide.' Lisa had donated everything to charity, aside from a few small things – a scarf, a gold necklace with a heart pendant, and Brynn's engagement ring – in case Jenny wanted them someday.

But was she the woman of the house? What did that mean?

Lisa scrubbed the soil from under her fingernails while the kettle boiled. And then she made herself a cup of tea (she'd also become a tea person, and had even joined a tea club, which sent her a new flavor to try every month), put two of the cookies she'd baked for Jenny on a plate, and sat herself in front of the family computer they'd set up in a corner of the dining room.

Eric's fiftieth birthday was on Saturday and Lisa intended to make him a red velvet layer cake, and her plan for the rest of the afternoon was to find a recipe online, print it out, stop at Louey's to get the ingredients on her way to pick up Jenny, then see if she could persuade Jenny to bake it with her. But when she tried to turn the computer on, it refused. Nothing she tried could coax it to life. She found herself walking toward Jenny's room where she knew her laptop would be on her desk. She knew Jenny would be furious if she found out she'd used her computer but Lisa would be quick, and leave no trace.

She slid her finger across the mousepad to wake up the screen and couldn't help but feel like a spy when she entered the password (Eric had insisted they have the password to all of Jenny's devices). To her surprise, a web page was already open on the screen in front of her – multiple tabs, in fact. The Google search bar read, *why do mothers abandon children*, and Lisa felt her heart break for Jenny, as it had thousands of times before.

'Oh, Jenny,' she sighed, 'you poor girl.' She clicked on the next tab, which was an article explaining how many women make the choice to leave their children because of forces outside of their control. One case study told the story of a woman who, after she decided to divorce the father of her children, realized she had no means to support

them. She'd been out of the workforce for years to be a stay-at-home mom, had no savings, and needed to get her life back on track. 'Leaving my kids,' she explained, 'was the hardest thing I ever did, but it was an act of love. I knew they were in a safe, stable home with their dad, and I saw them every weekend.' Another tab was a YouTube video of an interview with a woman and her adult son, who were discussing the reasons why she, too, chose to leave her child with his father. She, too, cited financial stress, a systemic lack of resources available for single moms, and the desire to take some time to become a better person. Her son talked about how much he respected her decision, and the woman she'd become.

There were eight more tabs open with content that was a variation on this theme: noble women living in an anti-woman world, victims of divorce, of wage gaps and paradigms that told them they should give up everything to be mothers, only to find themselves penniless and unskilled when the shit hit the fan. In every single one of these stories the mothers and their children were on good terms.

Lisa leaned back in Jenny's chair and sighed loudly. In all these years, she had never understood how Brynn could have done it. What must Jenny have thought when she read these articles? She wouldn't have seen herself in any of them, wouldn't have seen her own mother. Brynn didn't leave Jenny so that she could go back to school, get a better job, and establish herself for Jenny's sake. Brynn didn't leave Jenny temporarily, or with deep consideration for her wellbeing. The hard conversations the people in these articles recalled having with each other were never had in this house; not that Lisa knew of, anyway. Brynn had crept away in the middle of the night while Jenny was asleep. Brynn had no intention of returning, new and improved.

Lisa remembered the first time Jenny had asked her directly about why Brynn had left. Jenny was six. They'd been decorating Easter eggs, their fingers stained in a tie-dye of magenta, blue and yellow.

'Is my mommy coming for Easter?' Jenny asked, never taking her eyes off the egg she was dangling in a paper cup of dye.

'No, sweetheart,' Lisa said, her heart constricting, 'but we're going to have so much fun. The Easter Bunny will come and you'll have to find your basket full of treats!'

Jenny smiled at the idea of a basket full of Cadbury Creme Eggs

and marshmallow chicks, but she persisted. ‘Why?’

‘Why what?’ Lisa asked, dipping her own egg into a cup of dye.

‘Why did Mommy go?’

For a moment, Lisa had no idea what to say. She knew that Eric had told Jenny that everyone needed to live where they understood each other, and that they had stopped being able to understand Brynn. Lisa thought that was far too conceptual and weird for someone so young, and that it didn’t really answer Jenny’s fundamental question. Lisa wanted to give her something more substantial, more honest.

‘Well,’ she began, ‘your mommy got hurt and had to go to the hospital.’ Jenny stared at Lisa then, forgetting about her egg. ‘Her body got better, but her mind didn’t. Do you know what a mind is, Jenny?’ Jenny tapped her own head with her tiny finger. ‘That’s right, Jenny. Your mommy’s ideas and thoughts didn’t get better, and she didn’t want everyone to be sad about that. So she moved far away so that you and your daddy and I can all be happy.’ It wasn’t a perfect answer, she knew. And she wasn’t sure it was any less weird and confusing than Eric’s had been, but she hoped it would be enough for Jenny to let the subject go, to move on to the glitter phase of their egg-decorating process. But Jenny just stared at Lisa, her little mouth open, her brow furrowed like she was trying to solve an advanced math problem.

‘No, silly,’ Jenny finally said, ‘that’s not why Mommy left!’

‘Oh?’ Lisa asked, feeling wary. Was it possible that Brynn had told Jenny something the night she left? That Jenny had some insight Lisa lacked? She kept her voice steady as she asked, ‘Why did she leave?’

‘She had a princess party to go to in Narnia.’ Jenny was animated now. ‘Mommy’s a real princess. She’ll come home when she’s tired and wants a snack.’

Lisa was about to respond, to gently guide Jenny toward the truth, when Jenny yelled, ‘Glitter time!’ After that, Jenny occasionally asked Lisa to tell her what had happened with Brynn, and Lisa always tried to offer her the truth. But Jenny always rejected Lisa’s answers. The idea that her mom had left her over something so simple – because she said her words funny? – seemed to bounce right off Jenny. She still went to school with kids who couldn’t say their r’s. It must have been something bigger than that, she always said; a quest for pirates’

treasure or a princess party or a rocket ship adventure – something worthy. Jenny's indignation on this matter never waned, and over time, Lisa knew Jenny thought that Lisa and Eric were hiding something from her.

It pained her to think that the absence of Brynn still felt fresh and raw enough for Jenny to go down these rabbit holes. And she couldn't help but take it personally, even though she tried not to. Clearly, after all this time, Lisa had not been enough.

Still, if there was one thing she knew, it was that Eric wasn't going to be the one to help Jenny through whatever it was she was going through. If anything, Eric had seemed almost terrified of Jenny ever since she'd changed lanes from childhood to young womanhood. This was why she needed to stay, Lisa told herself – at least until Jenny went to college. Lisa couldn't imagine the two of them alone in this house – how would they survive?

Be the love you want to receive. This was the mantra that had underpinned her years in the Matador Street house. She repeated it as she remembered what her original task had been when she sat down at the computer. She typed *best red velvet cake recipe* into a new search bar and printed off the first one she found before closing her tab to ensure Jenny didn't find out that she'd been on her laptop. She would leave a little earlier, she decided, and she added the ingredients for Jenny's favorite dinner to her shopping list. It was, annoyingly, Brynn's famous tuna casserole. But Lisa had made it her own. She'd added artichoke hearts. She was, after all, the woman of the house.

The next evening, even though she knew she shouldn't, Lisa was whooping and cheering from the stands, waving her arms in the muggy high school gym where she used to sit and watch games when she was a student there. Jenny had told her that she didn't like it when she could hear Lisa's voice, louder than the other parents, piercing her focus, jeopardizing the play she was attempting to execute. But Lisa couldn't help herself. When the moment was upon her, the urge to make sure Jenny knew she was there, knew that she was supported, that Lisa wasn't like the women Jenny had been reading about online,

was so overwhelming that Lisa found she was yelling, 'Go Jenny! Go Jenny!' before she could stop herself.

Lisa could sense that Jenny – like the skilled point guard she was – was attempting to pull off something deliberate and important. She watched as Jenny performed a series of small, precise movements; a bend in her knees, a pivot, a dribble, and then she coiled her elbows tight against her rib cage, a loaded spring ready to launch the ball across the court to Kimber, open and unguarded to her right.

Lisa's phone pinged. It was a text from Porter: *Hey sis, I'm coming to visit next month!* She ignored it; she couldn't deal with it now. Porter had only visited Elderpool once since Lisa had moved in with Eric and Jenny, and he hadn't reacted well to the development. *It doesn't seem healthy, Leese*, he'd told her. *It's a weird situation.* She'd told him to mind his own business, that there were things he couldn't understand, that she had a connection with Eric and an obligation to Jenny, who was, regardless of all that had happened, the abandoned daughter of the woman who had been her best friend for most of her life. She'd expected an argument with him, that he would spar with her like they had when they were younger, but he'd just looked at her with so much pity that she'd had to turn her back on him; she couldn't bear to see it. They hadn't spoken much since then, and his life and work kept him away from Elderpool. The thought of him coming for a visit was too much to consider. She would message him later. Or she wouldn't. At that moment, she didn't care.

The sound of shoes squeaking on the polished court, the labored breathing of all the players, the shouts of coaches and teammates on the sidelines, the referee's whistle and the din of the crowd created a wall of noise that Lisa found both comforting and intimidating. Jenny was just about to unleash the ball when Lisa yelled again: 'Go Jenny go Jenny goooo!' And then she saw Jenny falter by a millisecond, falling out of tune with her body and glancing up at Lisa in the stands, trying – and succeeding – in transmitting her fervent disapproval, her raging wish for Lisa to shut the hell up. Nobody else's parents were yelling *that* loud, Jenny's glance told her, sounding *that* annoying, drawing *that* much attention to themselves . . . and Lisa wasn't even her real mom! By the time Jenny attempted to redirect her focus back to the ball in her hand, it was too late: Kimber was blocked by two

opposing players, and before Jenny could formulate a new plan, the ball was stolen right out of her hands and dribbled away in the opposite direction. *Fuck*, Lisa thought, *Jenny will blame me for that.*

They lost, 22–20. If Jenny hadn't broken the chain because of Lisa, they might have won, or at least tied and gone into overtime, Lisa thought guiltily.

While Jenny showered and changed in the locker room, Lisa waited, making small talk with some of the other parents. When, eventually, Jenny walked back out toward the stands, her gym bag slung over her shoulder, Lisa promised herself she would tone it down, but again, against her will, she yelled, 'There she is!' Jenny offered a limp wave.

'Close one,' Lisa continued as she fell into step beside her. 'But you're still Elderpool's very own LeBron James!' Jenny ignored her and turned her attention to Lucas, who had made his way down from the bleachers to join them. Kimber trotted over too.

'What are you guys doing now?' Jenny asked them, knowing that it was 7:45 pm on a school night of her senior year and she had a college essay to write, knowing that she wasn't meant to go out, knowing that Lisa would have made her customary post-game meal – meatloaf and mashed potatoes with gravy – and it would be warm in the oven wrapped in foil. They'd already made a plan, that Lisa would come to the game and they'd drive home together afterwards. Jenny had her license but her dad had yet to get her a car, and Lisa had told Jenny that she could drive them home, get some practice. But Lucas said, 'Taco Bell?' and Jenny said, 'Okay,' and handed Lisa her gym bag without looking her in the eye. 'I'll be back before ten.'

'Ah, well, um,' Lisa stammered. Would this be the moment she pushed back against Jenny? Would she assert herself? Would she say, *You know what, missy? Soon you'll see what life without me is like, and you won't like it, not one bit.* But again, she felt frozen. Unable to connect the circuitry of her mind to her mouth, her limbs. Finally, she stammered weakly, 'B-but, I made meatloaf . . .' and her face reddened at the desperation she heard in her own voice.

'It's cool,' Jenny said, already turning away, 'I'll have it tomorrow.' Jenny didn't glance back over her shoulder to look at Lisa as she deserted her in the gym, didn't see the way that Lisa's chin

quivered, or how she momentarily seemed lost in the same school she'd gone to herself with Brynn years ago, walking in an aimless little circle – Jenny's bag over her shoulder – before making her way to the exit.

Chapter Fourteen

Two days before her fourteenth birthday, Jenny had been following Lisa through CVS, using her peripheral vision to navigate the aisles and displays while her focus was on her phone, texting Yolanda. Lisa was filling up a basket with toothpaste, a box of maxi pads, some men's shaving gel, when they entered the cosmetics aisle. She was about to reach for some shampoo when she stopped so abruptly that Jenny bumped into her, mid-text. Jenny followed Lisa's gaze to the image emblazoned on the display case, looming over tubes of lipstick and mascara: *her mother*. They both stared, disbelieving. Brynn's disembodied head floated in fluffy white clouds. She gazed directly at them with her woodland-brown eyes, enhanced to look like they were cut topaz, her lips slightly parted, dewy, her air-brushed skin like vanilla velvet. Her auburn hair – wisped and blended into the clouds, which were like dandelion puff balls – framed her face like a satin-lined ring box. *La Belle Visage . . . For the Faces of Angels* the text read.

It wasn't the first time she'd seen her mother's LBV work. She had long since let go of the delusion that her mom was in Narnia. But up to now, all she'd had to do to protect herself was avoid fashion magazines, which were not her thing anyway. But this must be some new campaign and she felt somehow caught, as if she were the one who wasn't supposed to be in the makeup aisle. A black clot of gluggy envy lodged itself in her throat. Here was her mother – available, however one-dimensionally, to any passer-by. Here she was, offering her static attention to magazine-flippers and mascara-browsers and billboard-glancers so casually, so openly, and yet she was wholly unavailable to Jenny.

She stared at Brynn, unblinking, and felt herself grow very small. She might have believed she'd disappeared beneath the scorching rays

of her mother's flat gaze, were it not that she caught a glimpse of her own face staring back at her from a small mirror next to the display, smudged with fingerprints, offering her a split screen; on one her mother's airbrushed face and her carefree, empty eyes, and on the other her own, adolescent and unrefined, hair pulled back tight into a sporty ponytail, shiny forehead, chapped lips, a worry line scoring the skin between her eyes where her mother had only peachy smoothness. It was the closest their faces had been to each other in almost a decade.

'Jesus Christ,' Lisa said, and when Jenny looked over at her, she saw black trails of mascara-streaked tears streaming down Lisa's cheeks. Then, as if Lisa had only just remembered Jenny was there, she turned to her and said, 'Oh, honey, oh my goodness, I'm so sorry, are you okay?' It was only then that Jenny realized that she, too, was crying. Lisa pulled her into a tight hug, pressing the back of Jenny's head into her shoulder. Jenny didn't resist.

After that, Jenny had become obsessed with her mother's life, or what little she could glean of it without social media – which her dad insisted she couldn't sign up for until she turned sixteen. There was very little about Brynn on the internet that wasn't related to her work for La Belle Visage. There was the occasional red-carpet shot or society-page image – her mother smiling in a sea of other smiling, beautiful people, attending a film festival or charity gala – but that was really it. Nothing that spoke of Brynn's *actual* life, of who she was or who she spent her time with. Still, Jenny scoured the web, piecing together any scraps she could find and extrapolating great meaning from precious little.

There were photos of her mother arm in arm with Tariq Tahiri, who reminded Jenny of Zayn from One Direction, albeit older and graying at the temples, but he had the same smoldering gaze. Jenny googled him, and read everything she found. He, too, was famous. She discovered that Tariq had won a prestigious photojournalism prize for an image of a man, on his knees in front of a pile of rubble, holding a lifeless child in his arms, wailing, his open mouth a black hole of grief.

From these images, Jenny surmised that her mother led a life of beauty and meaning, that she was worldly, and must be very intelligent if she was with someone like Tariq, who'd seen the things he'd seen. She tried to imagine the conversations they might have, sitting on velvet couches in a palatial apartment, the Eiffel Tower twinkling through the window, but fell short.

Inevitably, these forays into her mother's digital life sent her into a deep depression, and she would go months without digging up any more bones. But, eventually, she would always go back for more. Something – a milestone in her life (first kiss, first dance, a big fight with her dad or Lisa, Ginger's death) would compel her to check and see if maybe, *just maybe*, there was a clue; some encoded message baked into one of the lipstick or foundation ads, something just for her.

There never was.

When she turned sixteen her dad kept his promise, and she promised that she wouldn't post bikini shots or anything that showed too much skin, no pictures of her and Lucas kissing or touching in any suggestive way, and no personal details – addresses, phone numbers, or even hints at where they might be having a party. Her Instagram handle – Jenny_Mitchell_08 – went live. And the first thing she did would have horrified her father even more than a bikini shot: she found her mother's account. Jenny went through every image and every caption, every fawning comment, forensically – but she couldn't understand the French.

Most of the images were related to La Belle Visage: behind-the-scenes pictures of photo shoots, product launches, reposts of the covers of fashion magazines. But, interspersed among them was the occasional image of something that felt closer to her mother, more real. A bouquet of roses in front of a window dripping with rain – Jenny copied the caption and pasted it into Google Translate: *Springtime in Paris, roses from my love – contented heart.* Another one of Tariq in profile, reclining on a couch, peering into a book, a dog lying across his feet. Jenny didn't need to translate that one; even she could guess the meaning of *mes amours*, followed by two red heart emojis. She stared at that one for a long time, her jaw clenched, her heart racing. These two beings – this man and this dog – these were the only two loves of her mother's life? The only recipients of her

truest affections? Did it never cross her mother's mind that Jenny might see these posts? Or even her dad?

When it came to her father, her own frustrations with him made it hard to place all of the blame for leaving squarely on her mother. She loved him. Sometimes – albeit increasingly less frequently – she even liked him. In those first awful years after her mom left, she remembered how he'd tried his best to be both mother and father to her, to compensate for the Brynn-shaped hole in their lives. Even folding Lisa into their household had been, she supposed, an act of love on his part, his attempt to fortify a retaining wall around Jenny. But it had been Jenny's dad who tucked her into bed most nights. Her dad whose shoulder she cried on across those endless early months, her dad who cooed, *Shhhh, Jenny-girl, it's okay, I'm here, I'm not going anywhere*, until she finally fell asleep. When she'd attempted her first sleepover at Kimber's house in fourth grade, it was her dad who drove over at two in the morning when she was inconsolable with homesickness, bundling her up in her sleeping bag and carrying her out to the warm cab of his truck, her pink unicorn backpack slung over his broad shoulder. Until recently, he never missed a school play or dance recital; he insisted on dropping her off and picking her up from every party. It was her dad, after all, who had stayed.

But for all his love and devotion, there was something of himself her father kept away from her, an unknowable, impenetrable vault inside him. The wood was strange enough. He was never without it. Over the years, he'd been able to put more distance between him and the piece of wood when absolutely necessary – he could leave it in the car while they ate in a restaurant, or leave it on a shelf when Jenny's friends came over instead of holding it on his lap as he normally did. They had never discussed it; even when she was very young she perceived that this was an unbreachable taboo. They all simply lived with it, this fourth presence in their home that was like a ghost.

By the time she turned seventeen and entered her final year of high school, it was more than just the volute that troubled Jenny about her father. It was his long, nighttime drives – his patrols, as Lisa called them. It was the way his politics were becoming clearer to her the older she got, the way he bandied about words like *feminazi* and seemed to add new categories to the list of people and opinions he

considered un-American, un-patriotic, and unacceptable.

They'd begun to argue about these things – a development that seemed to shock them both in different yet similar ways: something easy and dependable had ended between them, and a new, altogether more complex and thorny dynamic had begun. They now had the power to profoundly disappoint each other.

After a particularly passionate argument about when, precisely, life begins – he hadn't spoken to her for days, and when he did talk to her again, she noted a new formality where there had been familiarity.

And always, when provoked, he was ready with his litany of blame. He blamed his old wrestling opponent, Javier Lopez, who he had told her about countless times, always trying to elicit an outrage in her that she couldn't muster. He blamed the school system, and the failings of secularism and porous borders, he blamed the mainstream media and Hollywood and the deep state. He blamed her mother.

All of these conversations became wedged between them like a fissure in a glacier that would one day, she knew, become an unbridgeable crevasse. Over the last few years he'd been finding more and more reasons to leave early and stay late at Louey's, and more excuses and apologies for missing basketball games and school plays. He had essentially outsourced the witnessing of her life to Lisa, which Jenny had long since begun to resent in earnest.

He still said all the right things, but there was a force field between them. His words, his presence, his encouragement and support were all intact, but his hugs had grown stiff, and he no longer ruffled her hair. Jenny was also bothered by the contempt with which he treated Lisa, as if – twelve years on – she was still an interloper, a suffered guest. Although Jenny would never admit it to Lisa, this made her feel very bad for the woman who baked her a birthday cake every year, who had held her hand when she got her ears pierced and folded all her laundry.

All of these things muddied the water when it came to how Jenny imagined what might have taken place between her mother and father all those years ago. Had he pushed her away? She knew the medical mystery side of the story, she had seen the old articles. She knew her mother had some rare condition where she woke up speaking a foreign language, and she knew that eventually her mother had left them all to go live where it wasn't foreign at all. But there must have been

something more, she reasoned. She couldn't imagine the woman with the otherworldly face of La Belle Visage with her strange, secretive father. Had they ever made sense? Had they loved each other? Had she been the product of their love? She had nobody to ask these questions to.

But the *dog*. One of her mother's *amours* – this pierced Jenny's heart particularly sharply. Ginger, who had loved Brynn so unconditionally and who, Jenny knew from old news clips and family mythology, had draped her warm, furry body over her mother's torso, and thereby saved her from freezing to death when she'd had her fall. That her mother would have another dog struck her as more heartless, more callous, more of a betrayal than having a new husband.

Jenny couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her mother. When she imagined the scene, it was from high in the corner of her bedroom ceiling, watching her mother open the door, letting in a long isosceles shaft of hallway light across the beige carpet, gazing one last time on Jenny's sleeping face. Questions like subtitles scrolled under the scene: *If I'd woken up and called out for her . . . if I'd looked cuter, more unleavable . . . could she have, would she have . . .?*

Of course she'd considered DMing her, or even liking one of her mom's posts, sending up a digital flare: *Hello! Remember me?* It was the first time she'd had any real way to reach her without an intermediary. She knew her grandma Dana spoke with her. Occasionally she'd pass along a message – *your mother said to tell you happy birthday* – but never in the presence of her father, and these smuggled missives had become fewer and farther between. Jenny supposed she could demand that her father connect her with her mother, claim some sort of right to her, but she knew it would kill him. And really, Jenny didn't know what she'd actually say if she had the chance. A few times, especially after she'd smoked some weed with Lucas and their friends, she'd started to write her mother a DM in Instagram, but she only ever got as far as *hi* – coming up short with how she should address this woman. *Mom? Mommy? Mother? Brynn? Maman?* Nothing fit.

But then, two days ago, her mother had messaged her.

Hello Darling Jenny, it began, *I know it must be strange to hear from me like this. I hope it's not upsetting. I know I am breaking the*

rules, but I have been wanting very much to talk to you. Would it be okay if we found a way to connect? Jenny had felt a surge of euphoria when she first read it, and the almost-five-year-old inside her soared knowing that this message was finally, undoubtedly, just for her. Here was proof that she inhabited her mother's thoughts. But the elation was fleeting, and Jenny was quickly engulfed by outrage. *She knows it must be strange? She hopes it's not upsetting?* No apology or attempt at an explanation? Was she crazy? How could it be anything other than strange and upsetting? Everything lately was strange and upsetting. Maybe *Strange and Upsetting* was the Spirit of Our Times?

Now, days later, Jenny still hadn't responded. But the message – the request for connection – added a dull edge of persistent pain to everything she did, like a mosquito bite or a blister: you could forget it was there for only so long before it demanded your attention.

Chapter Fifteen

Dogwood was an hour's drive east into the rural interior of the oven mitt of the great state of Michigan. The last thirty minutes of the drive to the cabin Eric had purchased six years ago was down a dirt road rife with deep ditches and protruding tree roots that he'd long ago learned to anticipate and avoid. The closest neighbors were twenty minutes away, an elderly couple who were only there in the summer and were as disinterested in Eric as he was in them. The only marking that indicated where to turn off the dirt road onto a narrower, gravel-lined driveway was a strip of orange fabric tied around a pine tree.

Eric had told no one about this cabin. Well, *almost* no one.

Cheryl knew.

And Stars_and_Stripes.

Stars_and_Stripes was a user on the Patriots United message board Eric had joined years ago. He – Eric had assumed it was a he – had posted a message that he was selling a remote cabin in the Michigan sticks, that it would be a great place to have in case of an emergency. I'M ONLY SELLING BECAUSE I'M MOVING THE FAMILY TO TEXAS TO JOIN THE BORDER WAR!!! THE CABIN'S GOT A GENERATOR, AN UNDERGROUND BUNKER AND A WATER CISTERN ALL IN GOOD WORKING ORDER. WOULD LOVE IT TO GO TO ONE OF YOU PATRIOTS!!! IF INTERESTED, SEND ME A PRIVATE MESSAGE.

Eric had leaped at the chance before he'd really formulated a plan. When Stars_and_Stripes told him the price, Eric was frankly stunned. It was well below market value, but Stars_and_Stripes explained it wasn't about the money for him, it was about the cause. He wanted it to go to one of his brothers-in-arms.

Stars_and_Stripes walked him through how they'd finalize the purchase while allowing Stars_and_Stripes to remain anonymous, and

Eric too for that matter, who went by the handle Stonewalls_Ghost on the site. Admittedly, this slightly rattled Eric who, after all, was a regional general manager and dealt in spreadsheets and audits, making sure both the board and Big Brother were satisfied with Louey's management. He found the 007 nature of the purchase of an actual piece of property to be something like a trust fall, especially as he was buying it sight unseen. But in the end, Stars_and_Stripes had honored his word, and when Stonewalls_Ghost's money hit his dark web account, Eric received the passcode to a P.O. box in which, as promised, were a set of keys, a detailed map, and the deed to the property.

STONEWALLS_GHOST: ALL RECEIVED, THANK YOU
STARS_AND_STRIPES: GO WELL, BROTHER. DON'T GIVE UP THE FIGHT.

Feeling like a kid on a scavenger hunt, Eric had told Lisa and Jenny that he was going to a four-day conference for work in Grand Rapids, and headed toward Dogwood, Mary strapped securely in the passenger seat. Pulling into the cabin's long driveway for the first time, his heart sank. The term 'fixer-upper' didn't do the disrepair justice. The paint – which might at some point have been a lovely shade of green – was peeling and chipped and looked more like a mold infestation. He could see the gutters around the roof were rusted and likely leaking. Dead leaves, branches and other detritus blown in by the wind filled the front porch. The windows were opaque with dirt.

Exiting his car, he took in his surroundings. The cabin was ensconced in dense forest. Beech, cottonwood, maple and oak trees rose in a thick wall around the yard that had been cleared around the cabin. It was both deafeningly loud with buzzing, chirping, rustling life and heavily, profoundly quiet. From where Eric stood, so impenetrable were the woods that he literally couldn't see the forest through the trees, or the road he'd just driven down. What light made it through shimmered and dappled the leaf-strewn ground beneath him. A walkway guided him to the three steps up to the cabin door, and in the other direction turned into a pebbly trail, which led to a medium-sized lake. Lake Dogwood. Eric could just make out a bobbing orange buoy tethered to its murky bottom. As if it might bite, he approached

the cabin slowly.

Turning the key in the lock, he was astonished – and relieved – to find that the inside of the cabin was immaculate. The wood floors and paneling had been recently polished, not a mote of dust hung in the air, and the chrome kitchen sink and oven range gleamed. He explored, peeking his head into each room: the master bedroom with a king-sized bed, the smaller bedroom with a twin bed, the bathroom. Opening what he assumed was a pantry door, he found a row of small screens mounted onto the wall. Finding the 'on' button, they flickered to life and Eric discovered he had a 360-degree view of the exterior of the cabin. One of the screens was partially covered by what he guessed was a wasps' nest – he'd have to get rid of that. On the floor of the security pantry was a trapdoor, at the sight of which Eric couldn't help but feel a tremor of fear – too many flashes of axe murderers from horror movies – but then he remembered that Stars_and_Stripes had told him what was in the basement – the *bunker*, he corrected himself – so he pushed past his irrational dread, entered the code he'd been given into a small numeric pad and pulled open the door excitedly.

The bunker was a concrete warehouse that extended far beyond the footprint of the cabin above. Flicking on the light switch, Eric gazed in awe at the rows and rows of supplies and tools awash in the fluorescent light. He made his way slowly up and down each carefully curated aisle of sturdy floor-to-ceiling aluminum shelves, taking inventory. There was a paper products aisle lined with toilet paper, paper towels, and old newspapers – for what purpose he couldn't guess – an aisle for cleaning products and chemicals, an aisle full of clothing organized by season and gender, adult and child. There was a row of plexiglass lockboxes behind which were stacks of medicines, including syringes and what looked to Eric to be an IV kit and surgical scalpels. And then there was the food, rows upon rows of canned goods – most of it store-bought bulk buys – Eric recognized the Louey's brand chili – and some of it home-canned: mason jars full of preserved tomatoes, carrots, radishes and beetroot. There was even a section with dog and cat food, and another locked plexiglass cabinet full of seed packets. Finally there was another lockbox; this one had a grid of wire reinforcements threaded through the plexiglass and was fitted with a keypad on which Eric entered the code Stars_and_Stripes

had sent him. It opened to reveal a veritable armory: three hunting rifles, two shotguns, boxes and boxes of ammunition, a silencer, multiple deadly looking Bowie knives, and even – to Eric's childlike wonderment – a crossbow.

It would take weeks for Eric to have a full sense of his bounty. Stars_and_Stripes had thought of everything; there were hand warmers, fire-starting cubes, water-purifying tablets and a stack of board games. Batteries and old radios and walkie-talkies and sewing kits. There was a whole section of old car engines which, Eric would learn later, were kept in case a cyber war killed the wi-fi grid that all the fancy new smart cars relied on. At the far end of the warehouse was a small kitchen, a kitchen table, a row of six bunk beds with stacks of linens, blankets and pillows on them, and a few couches. Behind the only door in the bunker was a toilet and a shower which Eric assumed were connected to the rain catchment cistern next to the generator behind the cabin – both of which he'd been told to familiarize himself with immediately, and to keep in working order at all times.

Eric was confused and embarrassed by how much Stars_and_Stripes had given him. Hadn't he wanted any of this stuff? It must have taken him years to amass, to organize and plan. The items in the bunker alone were worth more than what Eric had paid for the cabin, he was sure of it. He sent a message:

STONEWALLS_GHOST: JUST GOT HERE, MAN, IT'S AMAZING. BUT I DIDN'T EXPECT YOU TO LEAVE ME ALL YOUR SUPPLIES!!! IT'S TOO MUCH, I FEEL BAD. PLEASE LET ME PAY YOU FOR IT. OR, IF YOU WANT ME TO START SHIPPING IT TO TEXAS I WILL.
STARS_AND_STRIPES: LIKE I SAID, BROTHER – I'M NOT WORRIED ABOUT THE MONEY AND YOU SHOULDN'T BE EITHER. JUST KEEP IT ALL CLEAN, DRY AND READY. ADD TO IT WHAT YOU CAN. AND WHEN THE SHIT HITS THE FAN, KEEP THREE OF THOSE BUNKS FREE FOR ME AND MY FAMILY, THAT'S ALL I ASK.
STONEWALLS_GHOST: OF COURSE, ANYTHING YOU NEED. THANK YOU AGAIN, MAN, REALLY.
STARS_AND_STRIPES: IT'S MY HONOR AND DUTY, JUST STAY READY.

Later, Stars_and_Stripes would explain to him that keeping the outside of the cabin looking a bit run-down was deliberate – better not to alert outsiders to the treasure trove beneath it. It made sense, but over the years Eric had allowed himself to fix up the porch – where he and Cheryl liked to sit in silence as the sun set and the chorus of frogs and cicadas filled the old-growth forest like a sonic boom – and to give it a fresh, albeit clumsily applied, coat of moss-green paint. The windows he kept opaque with dirt and grime, agreeing that he didn't want anyone peering inside, getting any ideas.

After that first weekend, he had intended to drive back to Elderpool and tell Lisa and Jenny about the cabin. Jenny was eleven then and as he drove home from his first Dogwood visit, Eric imagined himself beginning a training of sorts for Jenny, an initiation designed to prepare her for the real world. Like Girl Scouts on steroids. Up to this point, he'd done all he could to make the world soft for her, to smooth out its edges. She'd been dealt such a raw deal with Brynn, and, he knew, to a certain extent, with him. But at some point he was going to need to rip the Band-Aid off and prepare her for the real dangers, for the real threats.

By sixth grade, her school curriculum had already transitioned at a rapid clip from the basic, uncontroversial subjects of times tables and reading proficiency, which he remembered from his school days, to insidious leftist propaganda. Just that week she'd come home with an assignment that had riled him up into a seething froth of agitation. The worksheet instructed Jenny to look online (with parental supervision) and find out which former U.S. presidents had owned slaves. Then, she was to find at least one American city with a statue of said slave-owning president, and find another, worthier, person from that state who deserved a statue more than the former leader of the free world. Eric was gobsmacked. Sure, he conceded, slavery had been unpleasant for the slaves – but that was an oversimplification, it wasn't *all* bad, many slaves had learned useful skills! It was also an oversimplification to reduce the founding fathers and all that they had achieved to one element of their lives, especially as it was something everyone was doing at the time! But what could Eric do?

For years, he'd felt he had to tread a fine line at home when it came to his politics, his beliefs. He'd felt like he'd slid into the fringe of

even his own party, but – like the other men he met in the fringe – it felt like he'd been let into a top-secret and very high-level clubhouse, where they all agreed the only thing to do was wait for their moment. Eventually he came to prefer the fringe. There was something energizing about being both the underdog and the authority.

And then they got their guy into office. They began to reveal themselves more, to march in the streets, to shout their demands. Their guy had told them to stand back and stand by. They'd understood what he really meant: *keep going*. And so they did. He'd stood shoulder to shoulder with other patriots in the driving rain, a bandana covering his face, Mary in his backpack and his rifle strapped to his chest, to bellow his demands at the granite edifices of a power he didn't trust. He'd chanted *Our House, Let Us In*. He'd chanted *You Will Not Replace Us*. He chanted about whose lives mattered to him and whose did not, about who should be locked up, hung and exiled. Eric discovered that he very much liked chanting, liked hearing his voice blend into the din of the others around him, liked the hoarse, gravelly feeling in his throat the next morning telling him he'd burned as brightly as he could.

When she was younger, Eric imagined sitting Jenny down and explaining to her that the world wasn't safe, that the government did not have her best interests in mind, that there were people out there in the world – some of them right there in Michigan – who would do her harm if they could. That he knew it was scary, but children went missing all the time, that there were groups of powerful elite politicians and billionaires who would *literally* take her blood to use for their evil ceremonies. He would explain to her that the systems they relied on were vulnerable, and that they needed to plan for any eventuality. That she'd been lied to, by her teachers, her cartoons, even him . . . and that a war was coming, and that even she had to choose a side. Now that he had the Dogwood cabin, he could start taking her out there on the weekends, teaching her *real* skills, the things she would need to know to survive. He supposed Lisa would have to come along, too, and reasoned her new gardening skills would come in handy during the fall of civilization.

But, as he pulled into the Matador Street driveway and saw Lisa working in her flower beds, Jenny sitting on the front steps with a book in her lap, both clearly awaiting his return, he wavered. Jenny was still

so young. He wouldn't shatter her world just yet, he decided, he'd let her be a kid a little longer.

And so he didn't reveal Dogwood to Lisa and Jenny then, and each time he went away on a *fishing trip* or a *work conference*, it became harder and harder to imagine them there, in this place that had become so wholly his, and then *theirs* – his, Mary's, and Cheryl's – where he wasn't the man they knew him to be. Instead, he'd stop by a fishmonger on his way back to Elderpool, buy a few trout to bring home and present triumphantly, as if he'd caught them himself.

When Eric first saw Cheryl, he had two thoughts simultaneously: *Do not sleep with this woman* and *I am going to sleep with this woman.* Cheryl was the fourth candidate for the daytime floor manager position at Louey's. The first three interviews had been disappointing; none of them had previous retail management experience, none of them had taken any courses or studied beyond high school, and none of them seemed to – and this was a harder slight to quantify – *respect* him enough. There was just something in their bearing that struck Eric as insubordinate, lacking in the deference he preferred in his employees. It had nothing to do with the fact that none of them had been white. When his assistant knocked on his door to introduce the final candidate, his expectations had been dramatically lowered. But then Cheryl strode into his office.

Tall, tanned, slim but muscular, Cheryl exuded confidence as she stuck out her hand, offering him both a firm handshake and direct eye contact. He guessed she was in her mid-thirties. She was dressed in white slacks, a white blouse and white heels, far more elegant than the official Louey's polo shirt she'd have to wear if she got the job. Eric marveled at her. Her smile displayed both rows of teeth, very white, her blue eyes twinkled and blonde hair framed her face. Everything about her screamed health and sex and made Eric think of advertisements for multivitamins and toothpaste.

Cheryl sat down, crossed her legs, and placed her hands demurely in her lap, waiting for the interview to begin. Had he met her before? She reminded Eric of someone he couldn't quite place. A celebrity? A

famous athlete? She looked to Eric like America incarnate, and that's when it struck him: she reminded Eric of himself. Or, at least, himself before Brynn's fall, before Lisa, before he stopped trying to look like Louey's poster boy, gave up, and instead grew himself a paunch and let his gym membership lapse, allowing Lisa to, ironically, surpass him in the fitness department. Still, something about the way Cheryl looked at him made him think that maybe he still possessed something of the charm that had at one stage hooked a looker like Brynn.

He'd hired her, of course. He knew he was going to before she'd even sat down, but nevertheless he put her through the paces of the interview, mostly so he could bask in her presence. No, she'd had no prior management experience of any kind, nor had she completed any courses or further study. But, she assured him in her singsong voice, she was a natural people person, and she aimed to please. That was all he needed to hear.

He waited a few weeks before suggesting they grab a drink after work, and even then he was careful to make it sound casual, like a professional development meeting, something he might do with any of the lower-level managers.

Their first date, if you could call it that, had been at Ruffian's Steakhouse. They'd sat at the bar, intending only to have one drink, and three hours later they were sharing a lava cake and fighting over the check. It turned out, Eric learned that evening, that Cheryl didn't really need the job at Louey's, financially speaking. Cheryl came from money. She wasn't *rich* rich, she'd explained, but rich enough. Her parents, Tom and Renee Jansen, were property developers who'd made a pretty penny in the early days of Elderpool's suburban explosion.

Cheryl had an older brother, Frederick. 'But we just called him Freddy.' Cheryl and Freddy had been very close, she told Eric, and she'd recounted all the ways in which he'd looked out for her, always had her back. When Cheryl was still in high school, Freddy had been crossing the street – admittedly he'd been looking at his phone, but it was his turn to traverse the crosswalk, and there had been others walking alongside him. Freddy was one of six people struck by the elderly woman who swore she thought she was putting her foot on the brake, not the gas. Freddy was the only one who died. 'After that, I

kind of spun out,' Cheryl concluded, cutting into her steak, which was well done with ketchup, just like Eric liked his. 'I got into some bad things, not *bad* bad, but some drugs, too much drinking. I was supposed to go to college – I got accepted to Michigan State. I was gonna go into finance or banking or something like that, that's what my dad wanted me to do, get involved in the family business. But I was dealing with a lot of grief, and it just took me a little while to come back to the real world.'

Cheryl went on to explain how she'd only just returned to Elderpool after a stint at the *spa*, and Eric gathered by the way she arched her eyebrow conspiratorially that it hadn't exactly been a spa. Now, she was living at home with her parents, and getting a job – any job, even a job as a daytime floor manager at Louey's – was an important step in her road to adulthood, belated as it was at thirty-four. Eric, who was normally put off by women who gave off even a whiff of trauma or, worse, mental health challenges and clear emotional needs, found himself drawn to Cheryl. She didn't seem to require anything from him, and related the events of her life as if she were talking about someone else, or a movie she'd seen. She didn't seem to care what he made of her, and it made him feel profoundly at ease.

'So, what's the story with the volute?' she asked casually, glancing down at the gym bag between his feet that he'd neglected to zip. He was too surprised that Cheryl knew what a volute was to be embarrassed. 'My parents are property developers, remember? I grew up around architects and contractors.'

Eric had been asked this question before, and had borrowed from the *How to Talk to Others About Your Object* section of another website he frequented – a support group of sorts for people with Object Sexuality. But this site – unlike Patriots United – still filled him with shame, and he floated through it anonymously, never creating a username, never engaging in the comments section of various blog posts. *If you must explain yourself to someone who you know won't be supportive, or for whom the fact of your Object may jeopardize your work or family dynamic*, the site explained, *you may say something like, 'This is a valuable object with a lot of personal meaning for me, maybe I'll tell you about it someday.' And then, if the person in question creates a safe space for more dialogue, you may choose to*

share the true nature of your feelings.

This was, more or less, the line he'd given Lisa, Brynn's parents, his own family, and a few select friends and coworkers. He was grateful that Jenny had never directly asked him about Mary, but he could tell she had a deep aversion to her and steered as clear of her as she could. This was fine with Eric, who hoped he and Jenny might get through their whole lives without ever discussing it.

But when Cheryl asked, he found himself reaching for a different line from the website's helpful tips, and simply said, 'Her name's Mary and she's very special to me.' Cheryl just nodded and asked if he could pass the salt. By the end of the night, he'd told her about Stonewall Jackson's banister, that he believed Mary held some kind of special connection to the general, and had absorbed some of the purpose and conviction that had animated the man all those years ago. In the seconds before Cheryl responded, he worried he'd put a foot wrong – that perhaps his veneration of the secessionist war hero was a bridge too far in her own worldview – but she just lifted her glass of wine and said, 'Blood and soil,' without missing a beat.

Over the next few weeks, across the stolen moments of shared coffee and lunch breaks, the occasional after-work drink that turned into another dinner, and a long talk in his car outside of Cheryl's enormous family home, he shared the rest of his story with her – everything that had happened with his 'crazy ex-wife' and how it had come to pass that Lisa was a kind of live-in nanny slash housekeeper slash occasional fuck. And when he found himself saying, 'I have this cabin a few hours away in Dogwood,' he wasn't at all uncertain about disclosing his hideaway, as by that point hiding away with Cheryl had become his overriding desire.

That weekend, telling Lisa and Jenny he was going away on a fishing trip to the Upper Peninsula, he and Cheryl took the pleasant drive to Dogwood. It was late fall, and the maples, hawthorns, oaks and aspens were in peak blaze, their raging oranges and shimmering yellows, plum purples and blood reds lit up like holiday lights in the warm afternoon sun. It turned out that Cheryl liked all the same conservative talk radio programs that Eric did, and they found themselves nodding in unison when various fire and brimstone hosts warned them of the danger of the liberal agenda, exhorting them to

make their presence known at city council meetings and rallies, to run for positions on the local school board, reminding them that nobody outside of their group could be trusted. Eric reached across Mary and took Cheryl's hand. He felt blissfully content.

That first night at Dogwood, after Eric had made them a simple meal of spaghetti and garlic bread, after he'd shown Cheryl the bunker – which she moved through with the same reverence and solemnity that Eric felt every time he went down there – and after they'd sat on the front porch with a whiskey watching the autumn sun dip behind the trees, the lake a perfect reflection of the fire in the sky – Cheryl led him into the master bedroom. There she sat him down on the edge of the bed while she undressed slowly, methodically, unselfconsciously inviting him to survey and assess her – which he did, leaning back onto the soft pillows, smiling. Afterwards, as they lay under the thick wool blanket, Eric idly traced the contours of the tattoo on her shoulder – a black diamond on top of an upside-down V that looked vaguely familiar.

'What's this?'

'It's called an Othala,' Cheryl answered, caressing his chest.

'What's an Othala?'

Cheryl propped herself up on her elbow and looked down at him, fixing him in her gaze. She narrowed her eyes as if deciding what she would tell him, and then said, 'An Othala is an ancient Viking symbol, Eric. It means "inherited land"' – she paused, placing her hand on his stomach – 'it means that we, you and me,' she pressed her hand harder into his navel, spreading her fingers open, 'and people *like us*, are the true owners of this country. Do you know what I'm talking about?'

He did, of course, and that was when he remembered where he'd seen the symbol before. He'd long since slid into deeper and darker online waters, following Stars_and_Stripes from the Patriots United page, which was public and mostly a place to discuss politics and analyze manifestos the mainstream media tried to hide from them, to more private pages which required applications and approvals and passwords. This was where Eric – or, rather, Stonewalls_Ghost – read screeds about the dangers of a Jewish-run financial system and liberal Hollywood brainwashing, where the logistics of race wars were discussed in militaristic detail, and followers were urged to get

weapons training and gun licenses and to stock up on ammo before the left-wing nutjobs tried to take it all away. These sites were awash with symbols that still made Eric uneasy – swastikas and nooses, double-eights and the Nazi eagle, and, he now knew, Cheryl's Othala.

'What are you thinking?' she asked him, and he realized he hadn't answered her question.

'I know what it means,' he said gingerly. Suddenly, unbidden, he thought of Jenny – a confusing and uncomfortable intrusion into his thoughts given his naked, post-coital state.

How far down this path was he willing to go? He wanted to raise his daughter in a world that respected conservative Christian values, where abortion was illegal, where divorce – unless your wife suddenly woke up speaking French – was uncommon, where hard work was respected and you didn't get rewarded for laziness. He was proud that Jenny did well in school, and hoped she got a decent job someday, but really he wanted her to be content with a more traditional female role, to delight in childrearing and housekeeping, the way Brynn had before her accident. He hoped to walk her down the aisle someday and place her hand into that of a man who thought like Eric did. And, he supposed, looked like Eric did too, in the ways that mattered, at least. Was that so terrible? Weren't these the things every father wanted for his daughter?

What he knew was that he needed to stay strong for Jenny, to be an immovable force between her and the enemies that would take everything from her if they could. Just like his dad had told him when Javier Lopez had cheated him out of the 1991 High School Wrestling State Championships, he needed Jenny to know that this was *her* country, *her* place, that she was entitled to it and that she should – if it came to it – fight for it. And wasn't that what Cheryl had just said the Othala symbolized? How could that be bad? How could it be hateful, when all he felt was love?

He shuddered. He looked up at Cheryl, her blonde hair falling around her face like a veil, and she looked angelic, pure, clean. 'It's okay with me,' he told her, and she slid her hand downwards.

Eric and Cheryl went to the Dogwood cabin as much as they could. Eric had a key cut for Cheryl, and sometimes she went on her own, too. She never asked about Jenny or Lisa or his life at home on Matador Street. It was a world that didn't exist when they were at Dogwood. Even though the master bedroom – with its rustic king-sized bed and thick blankets – was inviting and comfy, Eric and Cheryl preferred to sleep pressed against each other down in the bunker, Eric curled around Cheryl, Cheryl curled around Mary – a doomsday threesome. Over the years, Cheryl had added items to the bunker's shelves – things Stars_and_Stripes hadn't thought of – boxes of tampons and sanitary pads, a Tupperware container full of cosmetics and elastic hair-ties, even a few boxes of diapers and cans of baby formula. *You never know*, she'd said, *people still get pregnant during Armageddon.*

This was Eric's favorite place; lying with Cheryl in the bunker, imagining the end of the world, proposing different scenarios and discussing how they'd manage. *Marauding cannibals?* Easy, they had solar-powered cameras and weapons, and Eric had drilled holes through the crawlspace in the roof where they could, if need be, perch like snipers. They had the whole domain of thieves and gangs covered. *Drought?* They'd make forays to the lake, and if that dried up, they were considering a desalination machine, imagining a world where post-apocalyptic refugees from the coast would trade them barrels of seawater in exchange for seeds, or the use of their working radio. *Nuclear war?* They had gas masks. *Medical emergencies?* Cheryl had been considering enrolling in nursing school – not to be an actual nurse, but so she could learn to administer the stockpile of antibiotics and pain medications they had, and how to set a bone or stitch up a wound.

What were they exactly, Cheryl and he? At first, Eric had been perplexed by his feelings for her. Since Brynn left, he'd always imagined that his next wife would be like Frank's wife, Gabby. That she would possess a cultivated meekness, that she would defer to him in all things, that she would be placid and compliant and grateful.

He'd never even auditioned Lisa for the role, even though she'd changed so dramatically over the years – physically speaking. He'd always known she loved him.

But he'd never forgotten the night he'd found her passed out on his and Brynn's bed, wearing one of his flannel shirts. He pitied Lisa, and pity made Eric uncomfortable. For him, pity was indistinguishable from disgust. He slept with her from time to time, to thank her for all she did; he was grateful to her for her help, but he knew she was getting what she wanted, too: him. But instead of a Gabby, he'd fallen for Cheryl, and Cheryl wasn't meek or deferential, placid or compliant. She was self-assured and brash, she swore, she was indifferent to church, she was independent and, he knew, had a private life he wasn't privy to. She attended clandestine meetings when he was home with Lisa and Jenny. She didn't always respond to his messages immediately, and when she finally did, she didn't apologize for the delay. And these days, when it came to the cause, she frequently knew more than he did, and she was the one who kept him informed, taught him things.

They had fallen into a vaguely discussed agreement, a shared vision, whereby they wouldn't ask anything of each other until it was time, and though they'd never really defined what *time* meant, they both agreed they'd know it when it happened.

The truth was, although neither of them said it aloud, that they both desperately hoped the world *would* end, that the prophesied conflicts would finally erupt. They wanted fire. They yearned for brimstone. They longed for the government to collapse, for the lights to go out and the grid to implode so that they, Eric and Cheryl, would be the last two people on Earth. And then it would be time.

The last few minutes of Eric's drive home always made him nauseous; an acidic commingling of shame and anxiety. Twelve years later and a part of him still expected to come home to a four-year-old Jenny screaming into the night; still expected catastrophe. This had only been amplified since Brynn's call, her ridiculous news. He hadn't mentioned it to anyone, and at times he wondered if he imagined it. But then he'd recall her words. *They will be sisters*, Brynn had said to him, and Eric had laughed. He had found it so darkly funny that Brynn would use the vocabulary of family, attempting to claim some sort of

tie between his daughter and the offspring of Brynn's dealings with the Arab. It was as absurd to him as the notion of Brynn turning up for breakfast out of the blue, arguing that it was, after all, her kitchen.

Idling at the four-way stop a few blocks from Matador Street, he waved to the vehicle on his right to go first, offering a weak smile to the driver. When it was his turn to continue, he proceeded slowly, his lip curling as he took in the Halloween decorations most of the neighborhood had begun to put up – witches and ghosts, devils and zombies. 'Demonic,' he muttered, and his hand instinctively reached for Mary on the seat next to him. He had long since forbidden Halloween decorations at home, and insisted they keep the porch light off on Halloween night to keep the trick-or-treaters away. It was bad enough he was surrounded by this blatant satanism at Louey's, which had aisles and aisles of the crap; he didn't need it at home, too.

But, even though it irked him greatly, Lisa had always taken Jenny trick-or-treating – which he'd capitulated to after Jenny had pleaded and begged. He had always found Jenny's tears impossible to resist, especially after Brynn left. But her costume choices were limited to animals or Disney characters, and he went through her candy forensically for any sign that it had been tampered with – he was on high alert for sickos. Jenny had long since grown out of trick-or-treating, but was she planning on going to any parties with her friends? Dressing up? He used to know these things, but he felt so disconnected from her life. Maybe he'd extend an olive branch and invite her to come to Louey's with Kimber and Yolanda and pick out anything they wanted; be the cool dad he'd never really been. Would that make her happy?

He hadn't even known about her basketball game the other night until Lisa had texted him a photo of Jenny at the free-throw line. When he asked Jenny about it later, she told him she'd just figured he was busy. That had kept him up that night. He was losing her, he knew it. But he couldn't think of anything he could *do* with her, any way to connect. She wouldn't go to church with him; she had decided she hated fishing a few years ago. They used to watch movies and order pizza and just hang out – but at some point that had stopped feeling easy or natural. He no longer knew what she wanted. But, he told himself as he pulled up to the curb in front of his house, he was still

her father, and he knew what she needed. And one thing he'd determined was that she most certainly did not need to know about Brynn's pregnancy. He figured someday he'd have to tell her, or Dana and Henry would, but what good would that news do her now? Especially when he didn't feel particularly equipped to handle her emotions. No. He'd wait. And in the meantime, he'd try harder to find a way to bring them back into each other's orbit.

Chapter Sixteen

Brynn, one hand protectively on her protruding belly, one hand in Tariq's, took a long, deep breath. She could almost conjure the voice of Lisette, her yoga instructor, telling her to *inspirez* and *expirez*, *inspirez . . . expirez*. They were waiting in the arrivals hall for Tariq's mother, Noor, and older sister, Assia, to arrive from Casablanca. It was their first visit since Brynn's pregnancy, and they planned to stay at Tariq's pre-Brynn flat, which he now kept as a studio, until Sabine was born. Her due date, Brynn privately lamented for the hundredth time, was still eight weeks away, and there was no guarantee Sabine would arrive then anyway – Brynn had been two weeks late with Jenny.

Brynn had assured Tariq that this idea thrilled her, that she knew the extra help would be invaluable, even as her chest constricted. The two Tahiri women made Brynn exceedingly nervous. They'd gotten off on the wrong foot nearly eleven years ago, and hadn't ever been able to recalibrate.

Tariq had brought Brynn to his family home in Casablanca, which was really more of an estate, not long after they'd moved in together. Tariq's father, Ahmed, had been a prominent and beloved professor at the Cadi Ayyad University in Marrakech. 'He was a professor of Engineering,' Tariq had explained to her on the flight from Paris to Casablanca, 'but really he was an intellectual, and his students often stayed behind after class to discuss politics, activism, things like that.' Tariq looked out of the tiny plane window into the total blackness, his eyes shining when he added, 'He took a lot of risks.' Tariq explained that his father had written many essays warning against the rise of Islamist extremism in North Africa; he wanted Morocco to continue to avoid the fates of Egypt and Libya. He was a regular fixture on news programs, and wasn't afraid to name names. 'He was a mystery, and I think that's what really made people angry,' Tariq said. 'He was a

secularist when it came to politics and government, but he was also really spiritual, more of a Sufi. He loved God, loved to pray, but he also loved a good malbec. He loved *chaabi*, Moroccan folk music, and he loved Bruce Springsteen.' Brynn watched as Tariq smiled inwardly, remembering something dear and private, and fell in love with him a little bit more.

Tariq's father was shot in the chest standing in line at the *harira* cart where he got a bowl of the steaming lentil and chickpea stew every afternoon for lunch. 'What kills me to this day,' Tariq lamented, 'is that he died hungry. The bastards could have let him have a last meal.'

Widowed and scared, Tariq's mother, Noor, had brought fifteen-year-old Assia and twelve-year-old Tariq to her family's home in Ain Diab, the affluent Casablanca suburb she'd given up when she fell in love with the man on the teacher's salary, but returned to when she had no other options, and, of course, the high walls and guards made her feel safer. Noor's family were fertilizer barons, which, Brynn would later learn, was one of Morocco's largest exports. Noor had been sent to the Lycée Descartes in Rabat and then on to get her degree in art history at the Sorbonne, but unlike Tariq's father, Noor's family kept their politics to themselves, safe inside the courtyard of the seaside villa.

Noor and Assia had not met Tariq and Brynn at the airport when their plane landed in Casablanca. Instead, they'd sent a private car to bring them to the family residence. Waiting for her mother- and sister-in-law now, uncomfortable on her feet at seven months pregnant and needing badly to pee for the third time since they'd arrived at the airport, Brynn wondered again why she and Tariq couldn't have arranged the same for them this afternoon. Brynn and Tariq hadn't been offended by the private car, and she doubted very much that Noor and Assia would have been either, but Tariq wouldn't hear of it.

On that first trip to Morocco, Noor and Assia had greeted them on the polished limestone steps in front of the enormous wooden door, and Brynn had felt acutely aware of how much she needed to shower and brush her teeth, to spruce herself up after the flight which, even though it was only about three hours, had left her feeling disoriented and disheveled. Brynn had been astonished that you could travel such

a short distance and end up somewhere so breathtakingly different. Tariq told her this was the American in her, which she conceded was true; the fact that she could board a train in Paris in the morning and find herself in London or Geneva or Milan for lunch still awed her.

For his part, Tariq looked as fresh as when they'd left for the airport that morning. One of the benefits of consciously adopting a minimalist wardrobe, Tariq often pointed out, was that you always looked ready. 'Ready for what?' Brynn asked the first time they had this conversation, after she'd looked inside his closet to find only shades of white, gray and black, t-shirts in triplicate, numerous pairs of the same jeans and rows of identical black trainers, as if they'd cloned themselves. 'For anything!' he said. 'Simplicity is always appropriate, except, of course, when it comes to here,' and he'd tapped the side of his head, 'and here,' tapping his breastbone. 'Unlike thinking and feeling,' he said, 'getting dressed in the morning should be easy.'

Things had gone off-kilter with Noor and Assia right from the start. They'd prepared a small welcome lunch for Tariq and Brynn, and the four of them sat around the table on the balcony overlooking the corniche, the Atlantic Ocean undulating placidly beneath them. Assia had followed in her mother's footsteps – both she and Noor were art historians – and together the mother–daughter duo had founded an organization dedicated to reclaiming North African artifacts and antiquities from European museums and collections. They were well known and well respected in the circles that mattered to them, and Tariq glowed with pride whenever he discussed their work; for him, it was heroic. 'You have to understand, Brynn,' he explained as they stood in front of an ancient clay figurine from Tunisia in a Paris museum, 'these things don't belong here, they've been looted . . . stolen by France. All of these things should be returned to Africa, every last piece.' Brynn had never thought about this particular problem before; she'd always just given museums – especially big important ones – the benefit of the doubt, assuming that if they had something, then surely they were supposed to have it.

Tariq was endlessly patient with her about these topics; he was the most patient man she'd ever known. In the twelve years they'd been together, he'd slowly fashioned a new lens for her through which to understand her adopted country – and, for that matter, her birth

country. When Brynn had first arrived in Paris, her idea of France was still mostly based on *Amelie* and Madame O'Flanagan's Elderpool High classroom; berets and baguettes, the Moulin Rouge and the Eiffel Tower. Tariq had given her books to read on the history of France's colonization of Morocco, and they'd watched documentaries about post-colonialism and attended lectures on Orientalism where she learned terms like *subaltern* and *semiotics*. He'd printed out articles by Edward Saïd and Christopher Hitchens and told her to take her time, to let him know what she thought of their debates.

They'd watched an Al-Jazeera documentary about the Taliban destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas. They'd wept together as the more than fifteen-hundred-year-old sandstone giants – placid and watchful – disintegrated under the blast of dynamite, leaving coffin-shaped depressions in the ancient mountainside. He didn't chide her when she couldn't resist asking, tentatively, whether some countries, especially the war-torn, unstable ones, wouldn't be better off leaving their antiquities in the care of more responsible nations? Didn't some of these things, the really, really old things, belong to all of us? she asked nervously. Tariq just smiled and told her it was an excellent question, and then made them a pot of mint tea while easily, conversationally, explaining to her that if the so-called responsible nations really cared about the objects they stole, they would build capacity in the nations they'd colonized, and donate the money and infrastructure required for state-of-the-art museums – it was the least they could do. Stirring sugar into his teacup and then tapping the spoon efficiently on the rim, he'd explained to her that while the artifact itself was of immense, incalculable value, it also mattered who wrote the *story* of the object, who created the *context* – and that this was why artifacts needed to be in their lands of origin.

Over time, Brynn felt she'd come to understand, as best she could, the two worlds Tariq straddled. There was the French Tariq, the Tariq she'd first met, the Tariq who knew Paris like the back of his hand and had been, along with Jillian, her first guide to her new city, teaching her how to *be* – and not just speak – French. And there was the Moroccan Tariq – whom she'd caught glimpses of in the Goutte d'Or and Jussieu neighborhoods of Paris, trading croissants and baguettes for chewy *maamoul* and tart *meskouta*. In these quarters, his posture

relaxed and his gait slowed. At Marrakech, his favorite Moroccan restaurant, he'd switch to Arabic with the staff and she saw a certain light in his eye that only that language could elicit, a feeling she knew intimately.

They talked about this, the way that language shaped and molded you, and that not all languages were created equal. Or, rather, not all languages could offer you the same viewfinder through which to understand the world and your place in it.

Tariq told her that Arabic had more words to describe different kinds of love than any other language he knew of. There was *huub* for early love, full of possibility. *Hawa* for the feeling that you've known someone for many lifetimes, *shaghaf* for all-consuming, passionate love, *aushq* for infatuation masquerading as love, *alaaqa* for steady, dependable love. 'But,' he'd told her, 'we also have at least a hundred different words to describe different kinds of sand, so there's that.' Laughing, Brynn had said that she couldn't necessarily think of specific words or phrases that French possessed that English didn't, but that she felt that French had profoundly changed the way she saw the world, saw herself.

'Oh, but French *is* better,' he'd said, and had regaled her with some of his most cherished Frenchisms, beginning with the phrase *l'appel du vide*, the call of the void, 'for that feeling when you're looking down from a high place, a hotel balcony or a lookout at the top of a mountain, and you kind of want to jump, you don't really want to die, but you feel you might jump anyway.'

'I know exactly what you mean,' she'd said. 'Tell me more.'

He obliged, and gave her *l'esprit d'escalier*, 'you know when you think of the right thing to say after you've already left the conversation? We call that "staircase wit" – the perfect response that hits you when you're on the stairs, the moment too far behind you to go back.'

'Yes!' Brynn exclaimed. 'That's the worst!'

'And there's *nostalgie de la boue*, one of my favorites.'

'Nostalgia for dirt?' Brynn translated into heavily accented English.

'Close, more like *longing for the mud*, the soil,' he told her. 'It's the feeling of wanting a simpler life, closer to nature, that ennui even

us charmed Parisians feel from time to time.'

'*Nostalgie de la boue*,' Brynn repeated, scooting closer to Tariq on the couch and nuzzling into the crook of his arm, placing her hand on his chest. 'Another one, please.'

He kissed the top of her head, thinking, and then said, '*Retrouvailles*, for that moment when you see someone you love again after a long time.' Tariq had no doubt been thinking of he and Brynn – of all the times they'd reunited after one of them had been away on a shoot. But Brynn had immediately imagined Jenny, standing before her, an indiscernible expression on her daughter's face. Forgiveness? Understanding? Hurt? Rage? *Retrouvailles*. 'That's a good word,' she'd said, recovering quickly, and then changed the subject.

But whether Tariq was speaking French or even the occasional English with a client, it was peppered with *yalla* and *insha'allah*. At home in their flat, he only wore his babouche slippers, even after Brynn had gifted him a pair of Louis Vuitton silk ones. Brynn loved discovering the complexities of Tariq's inner world, loved the trust he placed in her. But on that first trip to Morocco, mere months into their relationship, Brynn had still been floundering, still grasping for a foothold. And, she hadn't bet on the fact that Noor and Assia, two consummate academics, would have researched Brynn and unearthed her own land of origin.

'So, Brynn, we understand that you're American,' Noor began, sipping her fresh pomegranate juice. 'Your French is impressive.'

'Yes,' Brynn began, ready for the question, the same question she'd been asked countless times since moving to France, 'I'm American, it's true, but France was my destiny, it chose me.' This answer generally pleased people; the French friends and colleagues she'd made in Paris seemed to delight in an American defecting to the far superior France. And Brynn liked the answer because she felt it was, if not wholly the truth, then a close, poetic approximation of the truth. After all, she hadn't woken up speaking Spanish or Hindi, she'd woken up speaking French – so off to France she went! But Noor and Assia just looked at each other, and then cocked their heads to regard her curiously. Brynn could sense Tariq's body tensing in the chair next to her.

'Well, Brynn,' Assia took over, giving Brynn the impression that

Noor had decided Brynn's response didn't even deserve a reply, 'France, unfortunately, chose us, too. We didn't find it quite so delightful.' Things continued to go downhill from there. Through their eyes, Brynn saw herself differently. She wasn't in her country of origin, but unlike the objects that Assia and Noor strove to reclaim, Brynn had smuggled herself out of America, she'd written herself a new story, created a new context and mythology in which to both understand and explain herself. It had never occurred to her that this was a kind of theft, an abuse of power, a wielding of privilege, something that might not have been afforded to her if she weren't white, attractive, and – at the time – young: the trifecta of power in the Western World. But Noor and Assia explained all of this to her – slowly, as if she were a child – over mint tea and *fekkas*, while the Call to Prayer bellowed through the city.

Tariq had spent the entire trip playing the role of a stoic diplomat, attempting to establish a détente between two hostile nations, translating and apologizing to one for the others, and then to the others for the one. It was taking a toll on him, and Brynn felt bad.

So, a few days in, Brynn had feigned a headache and stayed upstairs in their bedroom while Tariq had breakfast with Noor and Assia. Without Brynn there, they switched to Arabic, and Brynn lay on the large Berber quilt under the carved wooden bedframe listening through the open bedroom window to the musical sounds of this language she couldn't decipher drifting up to her from the veranda below. Brynn loved the sound of Arabic, and had asked Tariq to teach her. He'd taught her how to say *hello*, *thank you*, and *my name is Brynn* – but that was the extent of her knowledge. She was beginning to drift back to sleep, listening to the easy banter between mother, sister and brother, when she heard Assia say her name. Tariq's response was agitated, and Assia rose to his agitation, and again, Brynn heard her name, this time with more venom. Quietly, she crept toward the open window, as if being nearer to the conversation would somehow render it comprehensible to her.

But Brynn could guess at the topic of conversation by the

incredulity in Assia's voice; what Brynn could tell simply by inflection and tone was a persistent request that Tariq explain something, explain *Brynn*. She knew the problem wasn't the fact that she wasn't Muslim or Moroccan . . . Assia's longtime girlfriend Birgitta was a Catholic Swede, and Noor adored her, seeming actually to revel in the norms the pair shattered. Noor and Assia had assiduously avoided asking her directly about Jenny, but Brynn would bet her left arm that Assia and Noor had asked Tariq about her infamous Leaving . . . about her previous life. *What kind of woman does that?* she imagined Assia asking. *Tell me, Tariq, how well do you really know her?* Brynn pressed her ear harder against the window screen.

Tariq lowered his voice which, Brynn knew, was a surer sign of his anger than if he'd been yelling. And then she heard the sound of his chair scraping against the tiles, and moments later he was opening their bedroom door. He stood in the doorway looking at her. Brynn could see that the diplomat in him was exhausted and didn't know what to say. She knew that if she asked him to confirm her suspicions, he would use up whatever reserves he had left trying to explain it to her; she didn't want to do that to him, and anyway, she wasn't sure she truly wanted to know.

'It's okay,' she told him, opening her arms and beckoning him to join her on the bed. 'You don't have to fix anything. We'll get along someday, I promise.'

But now, over a decade after that first visit, things remained frosty between the women in Tariq's life. Their conversations continued to be stilted and awkward. But Brynn hoped that perhaps her pregnancy would change things. She knew that Tariq hoped for the same. Assia and Birgitta had no plans to get married (*so quotidian, so dull!*) nor had they shown any interest in children (*every artifact I bring home to Morocco is my child*), so Tariq and Brynn were the only hope of carrying on the Tahiri name. At least, Brynn thought, as passengers began to emerge into the arrivals hall, she had a valid reason to excuse herself from spending too much time with Noor and Assia. She could say she was tired, nauseous, experiencing Braxton Hicks contractions, all of which were true. She was the one growing this baby, her Sabine, and Noor and Assia would have to at least *pretend* to like her now, wouldn't they?

Noor had made surprise reservations at La Truffière. ‘To celebrate the expansion of the Tahiri family,’ she’d said, her eyes darting between Tariq’s face and Brynn’s torso, avoiding direct eye contact with Brynn as if she were a wild bear. Brynn knew there was no getting out of it, especially when she saw the happiness and hope on Tariq’s face. She knew that he, too, hoped that Sabine might be the balm that smoothed things over between his two families. Brynn would try her best, she told herself, she would just let them talk and catch up, and she wouldn’t mind when they inevitably switched to Arabic, shutting her out of their laughter and nods of incredulity and amusement over the stories from home that Noor and Assia bore. And this was, of course, what happened. As Noor and Assia ordered platters of oysters and soft cheeses, steak tartare with raw egg – none of which Brynn was allowed to enjoy – she knew how the two women saw her: like an incubator, a host, a necessary component to Sabine’s existence. She may as well have been a pram or a bassinet, a means of containing Sabine, and nothing more.

Brynn sipped her sparkling water and picked at her plain pilaf while Assia recounted her latest artifact repatriation, this time from a private collection in America. Brynn was only vaguely paying attention, and didn’t notice when Assia suddenly changed the direction of her gaze, fixing Brynn in her crosshairs. ‘Sorry,’ Brynn said, sitting up straighter, ‘I missed that.’

‘I said,’ repeated Assia, ‘well, rather, I *asked*, speaking of America, how old your daughter is now, Brynn. Your *other* daughter?’

Tariq frowned at his sister and placed his hand protectively on Brynn’s knee under the table. ‘*Assia*,’ he began, but Brynn interjected.

‘It’s okay,’ Brynn said, smiling widely, squeezing Tariq’s hand as if to say, *I got this*. ‘Jennifer is seventeen now.’

‘And do you speak with her often?’ Noor this time, holding her champagne flute aloft, the picture of idle, harmless conversation. It was obvious to Brynn that Noor knew the answer to this question, but Brynn chose not to take the bait.

‘No, Noor, to be honest, I don’t,’ Brynn replied, surprising herself with her terse tone, her annoyance barely disguised behind a thin veil

of tact. She looked at Assia and raised her eyebrows, as if to say, *Anything else?*

'Well, surely she must know that you're expecting?' Assia said innocently, happy to accept Brynn's dare.

'Actually . . .' Brynn found herself making a spontaneous decision to be honest, to strike a balance between vulnerability and self-containment. Perhaps these were the ingredients she'd been lacking up to now? Maybe this was the approach that would finally engender something like empathy from Noor and Assia? If she dropped the pretense of the outsider wife desperate to win her in-laws' approval and just let them *in* a little . . . might it work? It felt worth a try, and besides, Brynn was herself preoccupied with this exact topic. 'We don't speak often,' she continued, 'in fact, it's been quite a few years. Her father and I felt that was best for her. But, recently, I've reached out to her. I would like her to know Sabine, to know her sister. I haven't heard back from her yet.'

Now, all three of them were looking at her with the same expression, and Brynn could see how much Tariq and Assia resembled their mother in the way three sets of pursed lips and narrowed eyes regarded her. The waiter came with their main courses before anyone could respond, and by the time he left, Tariq had deftly steered the conversation to safer waters.

Anyone observing Tariq and Brynn after they'd dropped Noor and Assia off at Tariq's studio would have seen the same doting, thoughtful, considerate man accommodating his very pregnant wife that they'd have seen before dinner. Only Brynn knew that he'd removed his hand from the small of her back a few seconds sooner than normal, and that he was avoiding eye contact even as he handed her a mug of chamomile tea with honey. Only she could sense how the conversation at dinner had wounded him, and she knew he preferred to tend to his wounds in private. She assured him that she was fine, that she was just going to lie on the couch and put her feet up for a while, that he should go have a shower and that she'd come to bed soon. The moment he turned his back and headed toward the bathroom, Brynn let

her tears fall.

Why hadn't she told Tariq that she'd reached out to Jenny? It had been three weeks since she'd sent Jenny a private message on Instagram. Three weeks since she'd seen one little word pop up under her message, taunting her: *seen.* Seen, but what? Ignored? Scoffed at? Forgotten? She became aware that at least a part of her secrecy was embarrassment. However justified, her firstborn didn't seem to want anything to do with her, and Brynn didn't want Tariq to know. Didn't want him to think that perhaps Jenny knew things about her that he didn't. But it was clear to her that leaving Tariq in the dark about her attempts to reconnect with Jenny had upset him.

Why hadn't Jenny responded? The question plagued her. Had Eric told Jenny about Brynn's pregnancy after all? She'd been so sure that he wouldn't. But perhaps Brynn's sense of what Eric might or might not do was out of date. She really didn't know him at all anymore. Maybe he had told Lisa and Jenny and they'd all decided that it was nothing remotely to do with them, that they wanted nothing to do with this baby. Her own mother, whose reaction to the news had been about as enthusiastic as being informed that she was due for a colonoscopy, had offered to inform Jenny, but something about that proposition had upset Brynn. She couldn't put her finger on it. She supposed that she felt in some way that she was still entitled to something from them, her first family. The Originals. She nurtured a quiet belief that when push came to shove, there was still something that bound them. But every day that passed without a response from Jenny, the utter ludicrousness of that assumption became clearer and clearer. What right did Brynn have to expect a response from Jenny? Could she reasonably expect Jenny to play a role, to be a *sister*, to be – Brynn realized as she replayed the conversation from that night's dinner, remembered the way that Noor, Assia and Tariq had looked at her – *on her side*?

It was stupid, she knew, selfish and maybe even a bit crazy. Perhaps it was her hormones, or the memory of the last time she was pregnant, almost eighteen years ago, when she was twenty-two years old. Now, she was forty, a fully realized woman, so unlike the frightened girl she'd been back then: always on the verge of panic, clinging for dear life to The Schedule, trying to outrun *The Song*. This pregnancy was so different from her first.

With Jenny she had been so scared the whole time, terrified of her body, ashamed, even. She'd had the most vivid nightmares throughout that first pregnancy; visions of misshapen, deformed limbs, of Jenny clawing her way out of her, of an infant with preternatural speech capabilities, looking up at her, still slick with their shared blood, and telling her, *You're doing this all wrong, you're wrong, you're wrong, you're wrong.* In her waking hours, she had been certain of two things: one, that Eric must not be allowed to see the rawest elements of childbirth – that if he saw her expanding vulva, or worse, saw her shit herself like she'd read was very likely to happen, that he would never touch her again. And two, that she would fail to bond with Jenny.

The first was easily managed; Eric had no interest in being with her in the delivery room, and she'd made it easy for him when she said she'd rather just be with the obstetrician and nurses, and that he could wait with her parents in the hospital lobby like it was the 1950s. It was the second certainty that scared her the most, that kept her up nights, pacing the hallway while Ginger kept a watchful eye out. *What if I see her and I don't feel anything? Or, what if I see her and I feel . . . something I shouldn't feel? What if she hates me? What if I drop her? What if I don't love her?* These hypotheticals had plagued her right up until the moment Jenny was placed in her arms, at which point they dissolved into thin air, and she was flooded with the most painful, annihilating love she'd ever experienced.

And she *had* loved Jenny. She *did* love Jenny.

But she'd left her, too.

Somehow, these two truths existed side by side in the same world.

And it was in the place where she buried these truths that an even deeper truth hid, a dangerous, hibernating viper inside of her – dormant, but alive – that she knew she must guard against. *W is for Whale who is Whispering! V is for Viper!* Brynn felt as if she'd been carrying a viper inside of her, caught in her ribcage, ever since she'd lain in the bathtub back in Elderpool – the fight with Eric still hotly searing through her – and had tried, and succeeded, in saying *uncomftorbul*. The truth was: *She could have done it.* It wouldn't have been easy, it would have taken effort, perhaps a vocal coach, but she could have trained herself to speak without an accent again . . . even if she still thought in French, even if she had to tie her tongue in knots to

transform her thoughts into words and words into sounds which wouldn't upset her family . . . she could have. And eventually, who knew, maybe she could have retrained her brain permanently. Maybe it would have gotten easier, maybe she could have gone back to normal. *But* – the coiled viper stirred, hungry, sensing prey – *she hadn't wanted to*. She recalled her long-ago conversation with Dr. Reyes, when he'd first told her about the idea of the second soul, how the idea had emboldened her. He'd been right. She felt entirely new in her French life, with her French soul – but had she thought there'd be no price to pay?

And now, she was bringing another girl into the world.

And this time she knew she would love her, she knew she would feel the same crushing rapture for Sabine as she had for Jenny. She knew that Tariq would be by her side, and that he would look at Brynn like she was a deity, no matter what leaked from her, or what tore open. He would tend to them both with a devotion Brynn still felt she didn't deserve. *You never wanted any of this, Brynn*, Lisa had said all those years ago, *and you never deserved it.* Brynn wanted Sabine so badly, but did she deserve her?

And here was the fear. The viper began to unwind and rise, to exact the penalty, to retrieve its pound of flesh.

She'd done the unthinkable thing, the viper said.

The very worst thing, she agreed.

The thing that mothers do not do, the viper asserted.

And she hadn't been punished yet.

Chapter Seventeen

‘The water’s still warm enough to swim,’ Jenny had paused their kissing long enough to inform Lucas. ‘We could skinny-dip.’

They were, in Jenny’s mind at least, only kissing out of habit, because it seemed like the only reason to be sitting in Lucas’ car – his mom’s hand-me-down Corolla – at the lakefront at night. They’d done it a thousand times, and it no longer produced any of the frantic desire it used to. Instead, Jenny used the time where they mashed their mouths together – kissing was really *so* weird when you thought about it – to think. She was thinking about all the fossil fuels they were burning to keep the car engine running so they could keep the heater on, which made her think about Freya Thomas, who had come to give a presentation at their school that afternoon. Freya Thomas had been a regular feature on the local news for as long as she could remember, making headlines with some audacious act of environmental protection, sounding alarms of extinction and doom. Once, when Freya’s mugshot had filled the screen of the nightly news, Lisa had said, ‘Your mom used to love her.’ It had been an offhand, throwaway comment, but Jenny’s imagination snapped shut on it like a Venus flytrap. What had her mom loved about Freya Thomas? Had she admired her? Did her mom care about the kind of things Freya cared about? And this was how the fossil fuels she and Lucas were burning had made her think about Freya Thomas, which had made her think about her mom, which felt gross and wrong while she was kissing Lucas, and was the reason she was again suggesting that they go skinny-dipping.

‘No way!’ Lucas said, looking at her as though she’d proposed they rob a bank. ‘Someone could come down here!’

‘Like who?’

‘People from school!’

‘Why do you care?’ Jenny extracted herself from his arms and sat up straight in the passenger seat, having made the spontaneous decision that this was an issue she was going to turn into an argument. She’d been doing this lately, testing Lucas, picking fights, pressing his buttons, identifying new buttons of her own which she hadn’t possessed the day before. Suddenly, she was passionate about skinny-dipping.

‘What do you mean *why do I care*?’ Lucas asked, flummoxed.

‘I mean, why are you so self-conscious? What is the worst thing that could happen if someone saw us? We’re a couple. It wouldn’t be a scandal. And we wouldn’t be the first people to skinny-dip in Lake Michigan, *Lucas.*’

‘I know that, *Jenny*.’ He started to tap his forefinger and thumb together in what Jenny knew was his telltale sign of frustration. ‘I just don’t want to, okay? We need to leave soon anyway, and we don’t even have towels.’

‘Lame,’ she decreed, even though she knew he had made two good points, and she crossed her arms and looked straight ahead, sulking.

‘*Okaaaay*,’ Lucas said, placing his hands on his lap, ‘so are we having a fight about skinny-dipping all of a sudden?’

‘Yes, we are.’ She turned to face him. ‘We are having a fight about skinny-dipping because spontaneity is important to me, and not giving a shit what other people think about me is important to me.’ None of these things were true about her, she knew. She was patently *not* a spontaneous person, and hated surprises, and desperately cared what everyone thought about her – especially her phantom mother. The exception was, perhaps, Lisa. But Jenny was on a roll now, and wasn’t quite sure what she’d say next. All she knew was that the ball of rage that had been spinning inside of her ever since Lisa had yelled ‘Go Jenny!’ at the game – after she had told her not to! – was erupting out of her, and it felt good. ‘This could have been a fun memory for us to look back on when we’re, like, super old. We could have had a new experience together instead of just doing the same stuff all the time. And now, to be honest, you’ve probably ruined skinny-dipping for me for the rest of my life. I’ll always associate it with this stupid fight and you being a pussy.’ She regretted it instantly. Lucas may not be her soulmate and her one true love, but he wasn’t a pussy. She’d seen him

jump off cliffs that were much too high for her, or hurl himself across unforgiving concrete on his skateboard, taking hit after hit while he perfected some new trick. He was brave in a lot of ways. Even the way he'd first asked her out had been bold; striding up to her with the confidence of someone much older than him and asking her if she'd like to go on a walk sometime, while her friends watched on, gawping.

'Jesus, Jenny,' he said quietly.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean that.'

'It's okay,' he said, turning the key in the ignition. 'I'll drive you home now.'

'No, it's not okay!' she said, suddenly furious again. 'It's not okay. Tell me I'm being a bitch. Tell me you're mad at me. Tell me it's not okay to talk to you like that!' Lisa's face appeared in her mind and she had the self-awareness to know that it was Lisa she wanted to say these things to, not Lucas. But the train had left the station and she couldn't stop herself.

'Jenny, what are you doing? I don't unders–'

'Tell me to fuck off!' she yelled. 'Kick me out of your car! Break up with me!'

'Is that what you want?' he asked evenly. 'Is that what this is?'

She took a long, deep inhalation and closed her eyes. 'I don't know,' she said finally, her eyes still closed. 'Just please take me home, Lucas.'

Now, lying on her bed at home, she felt distinctly childish. It didn't help that her bedspread was still the one with the shooting-star motif that Lisa had bought her years ago. In fact, when Jenny looked around her room, very little of it reflected who Jenny felt she was now. All of her belongings felt outdated – the Ariana Grande and Harry Styles posters, the mirror with stickers all over it, the shelves full of the *Hunger Games* and *Twilight* books, the feather boas and mardi gras beads she'd hung from her ceiling fan. But, she figured, there was no point in changing things now – she'd be gone soon enough. Off to college, hopefully somewhere far from Elderpool.

She had promised her dad she would apply to Michigan State – and she would. But she also planned to apply elsewhere, unbeknownst to her dad and Lisa. She figured if she got into any of the out-of-state schools, she'd break the news to them then. No need to get her dad all riled up for no reason, although every time she thought about UCLA, about the Pacific Ocean, about winterless Los Angeles and the thousands of miles between the Southern California campus and her western Michigan suburb, she felt a surge of desire that bordered on spiritual, as she found herself begging a god she didn't believe in to do just this one thing for her, to send her somewhere new and fresh, somewhere unmarred by the ghost of her mother, by the strangeness of her father, the neediness of Lisa. God owed her, she figured.

She hadn't told Lucas about her clandestine half-completed applications, either. Their plan had been to apply to Michigan State together. The fact that she hadn't told Lucas about UCLA didn't feel exactly like a lie. There was a chance she wouldn't get in there anyway and she'd end up staying in Michigan with Lucas, and all of their plans about renting a house off-campus, sharing a car, and taking weekend road trips to Chicago and across the border to Canada to see cool indie bands would come to pass. But, if not . . . she didn't feel sad about the idea of breaking up with Lucas, and she certainly couldn't imagine him in her California fantasy.

But tonight, picking a fight about skinny-dipping when really, the water *was* way too cold, had been dumb. She knew she should apologize again, or at least try to explain. But what could she say? She didn't really know what was going on with her, only that she was angry all the time, and that she didn't really know what she wanted. Maybe she should just tell him exactly that. Wasn't her dad always saying that honesty was the best policy? Didn't Lisa always say that the truth would set you free? *Hypocrites*, she thought, they weren't honest about *anything*. Her dad pretended it was perfectly normal to carry around a piece of wood everywhere he went. Lisa pretended they were a family. Still, Jenny should try to make things right with Lucas. If she was going to break up with him it would be because she was moving to Los Angeles, not because he wouldn't swim naked in a freezing-cold lake with her. She picked up her phone, but before she could message Lucas, an alert popped up on her screen: a new direct

message from Brynn Tahiri.

Jenny froze.

Her finger hovered over the app.

She knew she would read it, there wasn't a moment where she thought she had the willpower to *not* read it, but still she felt a disorienting mix of longing and dread, of hope and cynicism – the feelings she always experienced whenever she thought of her mother. Jenny had ignored her last message – *I know I am breaking the rules*, her mother had written, *but I have been wanting very much to talk to you.* Were there rules? If there were, nobody had bothered to tell Jenny what they were. Had someone told her mother not to contact her? Who? Her dad? Her grandparents? Lisa? All of them? Had they made this decision on Jenny's behalf? Formed a barrier between her and a mother who desperately wanted to be in her life? *Would it be okay if we found a way to connect?* her mother had asked her, weeks ago. And Jenny had left her hanging, unsure of how to answer her. What did she mean by *find a way to connect* – hadn't she just done that? Wasn't sending her a message connecting? What did she want? Hesitantly, like she was defusing a bomb, Jenny opened the new message:

> *Hi Jenny – it's me again. I'm sorry if my first message was overwhelming. If you don't want to connect, that's okay. But I thought I'd try again, as there is something special I'm hoping to share with you.*

Jenny didn't have the vocabulary for the flood of emotions that surged through her, a confusing junk drawer of chaotic, conflicting sensations. There was a part of her, the almost-five-year-old in her, that still longed for her mother, that blanketed Brynn in a kind of all-purpose forgiveness. She didn't have very many memories of her mom. Her dad had long since removed any photos of Brynn from the house, and wasn't prone to fond reminiscence. Her grandparents had some pictures around their house . . . but Jenny couldn't connect them with any actual memories; she was a babe-in-arms in most of them – rosy-cheeked and pot-bellied and oblivious to the fact that her mother wasn't hers to keep, that the sand was already draining out of the hourglass. But she did remember – with searing clarity – the night of the fall.

She remembered the coloring book she was busy with – she'd just finished the orange of Cinderella's pumpkin carriage.

She remembered her trepidation as she left her arts and crafts table and made her way to the kitchen, the ominous sense that something was wrong. She remembered the sensation of her full bladder, and of reminding herself to go to the toilet, as she didn't have a pull-up on. (There was a sticker at stake, and stickers meant a reward!) But the sliding door was slightly open, small gusts of snow blowing into the house . . . so wrong! Not the routine! Not The Schedule that had governed her short life up to that point . . .

Where was her mom? She'd peered at the black abyss beyond the door.

Her bare feet had grown cold as she crept right up to the threshold, not daring to extend even a toe outside . . . where monsters lurked, where Night lived.

And then she'd seen them; her mother's body at the bottom of the stairs, bent and wrong in every way, Ginger laying across her, panting, her hot breath like puffs of smoke in the frigid air.

The sensation of her hot urine as it trickled down her freezing little legs.

The sound of her own wailing.

Being alone with her wailing for a thousand hours, unrescued.

And then, finally, the relief of being lifted into her dad's arms.

Jenny hadn't stopped staring at her phone – at her mother's message – while she waited for the seizure of her memories to pass through her, her body rigid with their power, her hand gripping the device like she was trying to crush it. Should she respond? Part of her was desperate to connect, part of her was terrified of connecting. And what was this *special news*? What could her mother possibly want to share with her? Before she could decide, words appeared under her mother's name: *Active now.*

Jenny dropped the phone as if it had burned her. It was like a portal had opened. She had the odd sensation that her mother could *see* her,

like a fairy-tale witch looking into a crystal ball. Was her mother seeing the same words under her name? Jenny had another sudden, unbidden memory; her mother tying a string between two paper cups and pretending it was a phone, Jenny's little ear squeezed into her cup, her mother speaking into the other: *Hello, Jenny-girl, it's Mommy!* Was there a string between them now, buzzing with words and messages? She picked up the phone again and stared. And then, like all her wishes and all her fears coming true at once, a new message appeared:

Jenny?

Jenny held her breath, her thumbs hovering over the little keypad, poised, uncertain, trembling. And then, as if they'd gone on autopilot, she found herself typing:

Hi.

Oh hello! How are you?

Fine

Oh that's good! Your grandmother
tells me you're on varsity basketball?

Yes

Oh well that's very impressive.
Well done, you!

Her heart leaped forward at the praise – an atavistic impulse she was powerless against – before it promptly tripped and fell as she remembered herself.

thanks

Jenny, I know this must be strange . . .

It is

It's been a very long time . . .

It has

Do you maybe want to talk on the phone, or we could video chat? I'd love to see your face . . .

Jenny wasn't sure she could maintain her composure if they were suddenly face to face in real time. As it was, her eyes were already

blinking rapidly, and she did not want her mother to see her cry.

I don't think so, sorry

No, that's perfectly ok, it's a lot to ask.

It's late here

Of course it is. It's early here, 5am.
I really have been wanting to talk to you,
Jennifer.

Ok

I have some news I want to share with you,
I feel like an actual conversation would be
better, but I don't want to pressure you

Just tell me now

Ok . . . well . . . I know you are aware that I
have remarried? Your dad has told you, or
your grandma? His name is Tariq.

Yes i know

Ok, well, Jenny . . . you are going to be a
big sister!

The tears she'd been fighting breached the dam. 'What the actual fuck?' she said aloud, and flung her phone across the room. From where it landed, she heard her phone ping four more times in rapid succession.

There was no way in hell she was going to fall asleep. Her mother's news felt like a gunshot had ripped her open and her guts were spilling out into her own hands. She lay in her bed, heart racing. She had retrieved her phone from where she'd thrown it and was staring at the last four messages that had traveled all the way from Paris to her bedroom:

Jenny?

Are you ok?

I know this is complicated news . . .

Jenny, I'm so sorry.

She thought about messaging Kimber and Yolanda on their group thread, but she hated talking about her mom with them. It always left her feeling embarrassed and ashamed, as if it said something about her that her mother hadn't cared enough to stay; hadn't chosen her. It occurred to her that this portal had been available to them for years. Her mother could have reached out on numerous occasions but she clearly hadn't wanted to. She'd had nothing to say to Jenny until she wanted to inform her that she was no longer her mother's only child.

She thought about opening ATHENA, the AI therapy app her whole school had been required to download after there had been a suicide cluster at a high school two counties over. She got regular texts from ATHENA on her phone, reminding her that it was normal to need help, that it was okay not to be okay, asking her if there was anything she wanted to talk about. So far, she'd never taken ATHENA up on the offer. And she didn't think AI could help her with this particular quagmire. She imagined trying to explain it to the machine mind: *My estranged mother who abandoned me when I was a child because of a brain injury that made her speak French is having a new baby and she wants me to . . . I'm not sure what she wants, what the fuck does she want?*

Instead, she decided to play the Universe Game. Lisa had invented it, years ago when Jenny had struggled with sleep, scared of the visions her sleeping brain concocted. Lisa had sat next to her, stroking her sweaty head, and walked her through the steps of the game. It had worked then, but she wasn't sure it was strong enough to work now.

She closed her eyes and began: *I am in my bed . . . my bed is in my room . . . my room is in my house . . . my house is on my street, my street is in my neighborhood . . .* Jenny continued expanding the concentric circles of her coordinates until she was on Earth, and Earth was in the Milky Way, and the Milky Way was in the endless black of space.

Hours later, a beam of morning sunlight passing across her face, Jenny burst back into consciousness, fists balled, ready to bash the world. Her brain immediately resumed trying to make sense of what her mother had told her. *Why* her mother told her. What did she think Jenny would do with that information? What the hell was she thinking with those stupid emojis?

She dressed quickly and hurried into the kitchen, hoping to catch her dad, planning to confront him. She was raw with anger, indignant with shock, and certain her dad had known what her mother's *special news* was and that he'd chosen to keep it from her. She didn't know how she knew this, but she *knew*.

But when she erupted into the kitchen, only Lisa was there, wrapped in her robe, pulling banana bread out of the oven. The pulsing confrontation inside of Jenny had taken on a life of its own, and if she couldn't unleash her wrath on her father, Lisa would do.

'Did you know?' Jenny said in a low, unsteady voice from the edge of the kitchen archway.

'Oh, good morning! I made banana br–'

'Did. You. *Know*.'

'Did I know what, Jenny?' Lisa's voice was calm, the voice she'd used with a much younger Jenny when she'd been on the cusp of a meltdown.

'*About the baby*.'

'The baby?'

'Yes, the baby.'

'Whose baby? Oh my God, Jenny, are you . . .?' Lisa took a tremulous step toward Jenny.

'No, not *my* baby,' Jenny said, her voice rising, 'my *mom's* baby!'

'What? *Brynn?* She's pregnant? How did you . . . did you talk to her?'

Jenny had no interest in divulging what had happened with her mother, or offering Lisa an opportunity to comfort her. She didn't want comfort, she wanted a culprit. 'Where's my dad?' she demanded, coolly ignoring all of Lisa's questions.

'Honey . . . are you okay?'

'Where the fuck is my dad, Lisa?' It was half past six in the morning. Usually he'd already be up and dressed, sitting at the kitchen

table drinking his black coffee and reading the news – or one of his crazy ALL CAPS blogs.

'He went to work early.' Lisa was frantic, which just made Jenny angrier. 'Just let me go and get dressed and I'll drive you to Louey's and we can talk to your dad.' Lisa was holding her palms up toward Jenny as if she was worried Jenny might attack her as she backed out of the kitchen and disappeared down the hall. 'Two minutes!'

Jenny fumed. And then she saw the keys to Lisa's van next to her purse on the kitchen counter. Jenny didn't hesitate. Moments later she was pulling away from the Matador Street house, on the hunt for her father.

Driving still made her exceedingly nervous. She'd only driven on her own a few times before, and then only around their subdivision, practicing. The drive to Louey's required that she get onto the highway, merge with morning traffic, and then exit the highway. She accidentally turned her windshield wipers on instead of her blinkers, twice. She'd been honked at for going too slowly, and again for going too fast. But finally she turned into the Louey's parking lot.

She continued past the empty customer parking area and pulled around behind the building to the small staff lot where her father always parked. She'd go in the back door and directly up to his office. Louey's didn't even open for another two hours, but she didn't want to risk running into her grandpa at the butcher counter, or making small talk with the employees, some of whom she'd known her whole life, and many of whom still gave her the pitying look she associated with abandoned puppies.

She saw her dad's truck parked in its usual spot, but she decided it'd be easier to park further away where the lot was still empty at this early hour. Regardless of her lack of parking skills, she felt a brief moment of pride that she'd successfully made this journey on her own, executing all the right maneuvers. Turning off the ignition and pulling up the parking brake felt like the two most adult actions she'd ever taken. But when she remembered why she'd come, she tightened back

into a coiled spring of rage.

She opened the door and got out of the van, slamming it shut, and had begun to make her way purposefully toward the back door when, passing her dad's truck, she saw a fluttering movement in the corner of her eye, shadows moving inside the cab. *What the hell?* she thought. Multiple possibilities occurred to her; her dad was in the car listening to the radio, his piece of wood on his lap, as he liked to do sometimes; or maybe someone had broken in, a homeless person, and was rifling through the glove box; or maybe she hadn't seen anything at all, and her eyes were playing tricks on her. The morning sun had not fully risen, after all, and the cab of the truck was a dark mosaic of shadows. But then she saw it again – a head? Two heads? An animal? She crept along the narrow strip between her dad's truck and another vehicle, crouching low, and then slowly rose to peek inside the passenger window . . . and there was her father and some strange woman tangled up in an embrace, kissing. She saw her father's hands under the back of the woman's shirt.

'What the fuck, Dad!' Jenny yelled, pounding on the window. The mass of limbs inside the car jumped and pulled apart into two distinct bodies: her father's, and the stranger's.

'Jenny!' he yelled, but she didn't wait to hear more. By the time he'd gotten out of the truck she had already sprinted across the lot and launched herself back into the van. Even though her hands were shaking and her heart was racing, she managed a dramatic exit, complete with screeching tires that sounded exactly the way she felt – wild, manic and slightly possessed. Now she just needed to figure out where she was driving to next.

Chapter Eighteen

Lisa had changed out of her pajamas and, figuring Jenny had gone to the bathroom or back into her bedroom, was about to slice the banana bread to bring with them on the drive to Louey's. Jenny needed breakfast, after all, something warm and soothing. That was when she noticed her car keys were gone. And then she froze again, the knife hovering over the loaf.

The banana bread she'd gotten up early to bake for Jenny.

The banana bread she'd hoped would serve as an apology for embarrassing her at the basketball game, for yelling too loud, for trying too hard, *again*.

The banana bread to which she'd added an extra tablespoon of vanilla, an extra teaspoon of cinnamon, to make it just a little bit nicer than the recipe called for. So that maybe Jenny would say that it was okay. Possibly even good. Lisa knew she couldn't hope for a *This is delicious!* or an *Oh my god, thank you!* But she had, in the past, received a *This is good*, and five minutes ago, that would have been enough for Lisa. But now, she was angry. She was so, so angry.

Move, she told herself, *do something.* But she couldn't move. She had no idea what to do. She felt, in the most literal sense, stunned. *Brynn is pregnant?* Lisa couldn't quite decipher what this news aroused in her. Rationally, she knew it had nothing whatsoever to do with her – aside from how it was clearly upsetting Jenny – because the goings-on of Brynn's life had long since ceased to be relevant to Lisa.

Lisa had never really made a best friend again, and missed both the physical and emotional intimacy she and Brynn used to share, how they'd walk around naked and get changed in front of each other, or how Brynn would barge into the bathroom when Lisa was in the shower, put the toilet lid down and sit on it to talk her ear off about how her boss at the restaurant was a total perv, or make plans about

how they were going to spend their weekend, casually painting her toenails while Lisa shaved her legs. But when it came to the actual details of Brynn's real life, Lisa felt that she could honestly say that she did not care.

Lisa didn't follow Brynn on Instagram, she didn't purchase glossy fashion magazines where she might encounter Brynn's *belle visage* gazing back at her, nor did her algorithm offer it up to her.

Standing in the kitchen, bread knife in midair, a long-buried memory resurfaced, making her cheeks redden in shame. She recalled the night of Jenny's fourth birthday party, when she'd had far too much to drink and sung *The Song*, forever changing things between her and Brynn. But it was what she'd done in the bathroom that she thought about now, how she'd flushed one of Brynn's pearl earrings down the toilet. Why had she done it? What did she think that loss would do to Brynn? To take a pair and halve it? She was certain she was no longer the kind of person who would do something like that. She had grown so much since Brynn left, she knew she had. But still, it was a horrid thing to have done. What had Brynn ever really done to her except *be* who Lisa wished she herself could be, and *have* what Lisa wished she could have? But still, Lisa had tried to be loyal. She had tried to stand by Brynn, to warn her that she was going to lose everything if she didn't try to . . . *to what?* To speak with the correct accent? God, it all seemed so stupid sometimes! But in the end, it was Brynn who'd turned on her. 'Eez it normale that you *looooooove* Aireek?' Brynn had taunted her, making her feel so small, so dumb.

Move, you idiot! She put the knife down on the counter, but found that was all she could do. Nothing else made any sense.

How had Jenny found out that Brynn was pregnant?

Did Jenny and Brynn talk?

And if they did, how long had they been talking?

Did they talk about *her*?

Did they laugh at her?

Lisa could imagine Jenny telling Brynn how she and Eric didn't share a bedroom, how Lisa was more like a nanny or a housekeeper. How she'd yelled like a maniac at Jenny's game, mortifying her. What would Brynn think of that? Would she think that Lisa had got what she deserved for swooping in on someone else's husband? *But she gave*

him to me, Lisa thought, *she gave them both to me.*

Her phone rang, jolting her out of her paralysis.

'Hello?' she answered, surprised at how frantic her voice sounded.

'Is she home?' It was Eric. He was driving, she could tell, and upset.

'No, she took my van,' she reported. 'She went to find you.'

'I know!' he shouted, and then, 'I'm sorry,' in a more even tone, 'we had an, um, argument and she took off. I don't know where she is.'

'You had an argument?'

'Yeah.' Something in his voice sounded distracted, uncertain.

'About . . . the *baby*?' she ventured.

'The baby?' he asked in a weirdly high-pitched tone, confused.

'She was asking if I knew about the baby.'

'What baby?'

'*Brynn's* baby, Eric.'

'Oh, fuck,' he said softly, and then more loudly, 'fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!'

'Eric.' He was making her nervous, so she tried to sound in control, like a 911 operator. 'Calm down and tell me what's going on.'

'Just go look for her!'

'I don't have a car, Eric! She took it!'

'Fuck!'

She took a deep breath, tried to make a plan. 'Come get me and drop me off downtown, and I'll go look for her there while you check the school, the lake, her friends' houses and Lucas' place, okay?'

'Okay,' he said tightly, and hung up.

Lisa sprang into action. She texted Lori, her gym friend, that she wouldn't be making Cardio Inferno this morning. She texted her plant friend that she wouldn't be making the seedling sale this afternoon. Jenny needed her, even if Jenny didn't know it.

She was standing at the kitchen counter, waiting for Eric, when it occurred to her that she hadn't even tried to call Jenny. She dialled, and the call went straight to voicemail. She texted: *Please call, very worried.* She waited, trying to think of something more she could do. Dana! Surely Dana would know if Brynn was pregnant. Maybe Jenny had gone to her grandparents' house. Dana picked up on the first ring.

‘Hello?’

‘Dana, it’s Lisa.’

‘Yes, Lisa, your name came up on my phone.’ Lisa could hear a television on in the background and water running from a faucet.

‘We’ve had a little incident here this morning.’

The faucet turned off.

‘What sort of incident?’

‘It’s Jenny, she’s very upset. She’s taken the car and we can’t find her. She’s not answering her phone. She’s not with you, is she?’

‘No. For God’s sake, Lisa, don’t you think I would have told you if she was? What’s happened?’

‘Well, apparently she’s been in contact with Brynn. And *apparently*, Brynn told Jenny that she was having a baby.’

Silence.

‘Dana? Did you know?’

Silence.

‘Dana?’

‘I’ll let *Eric* know if she comes here.’

‘Dana! What is going on? Did you know? Have Brynn and Jenny been talking?’

‘This is a *family* matter, Lisa,’ Dana said firmly, and hung up the phone.

Lisa picked up the loaf of banana bread and heaved it across the kitchen, knocking the clock off the wall and shattering it dramatically. The bread exploded into perfectly baked crumbs of shrapnel, with extra vanilla and cinnamon, just as Eric walked into the kitchen.

‘I made some *fucking* banana bread!’ she shouted, and walked past him out the door and into his truck, which smelled like a perfume she didn’t wear.

Chapter Nineteen

'Her name is Cheryl,' Eric said, looking straight ahead. They hadn't even left Elderpool Terrace, and he hadn't really formulated an endgame, but he knew that he didn't have the energy to lie to Lisa. He knew, not without a flutter of shame, that he didn't *care* enough to lie to Lisa. Jenny had caught him in the act, and he could tell that Lisa – so rarely in his truck with him – had caught Cheryl's scent, the vanilla-lemon swirl of her perfume, the lavender of her hair, and, possibly, the rich mineral tones of her deeper, more private scent – the potent pheromones whose spell Eric was under. So there was no reason to come up with a cover story.

And as soon as he said the words out loud – *her name is Cheryl* – he realized that he'd been wanting to do this for a long time. He and Jenny had both outgrown their need for Lisa, and he did not see Lisa in their future. In fact, it occurred to him then, perhaps if Lisa were gone it would be easier for he and Jenny to get back to how they'd once been; close and comfortable. The morning's events had only strengthened his sense that he needed to take full rein of his life, and everyone in it.

Lisa said nothing. She held her phone in both hands on her lap, and Eric knew she was as desperate as he was for Jenny to call – but Lisa's love for his daughter had long since ceased to soften Eric to her. Not that he was particularly hardened against her – but he had told her, years ago now, what he could and couldn't be for her, what *this* was and wasn't – and she'd made her choice. That she loved Jenny, worried for Jenny, cared for Jenny – *that she loved him, worried for him, cared for him* . . . occasionally shared her bed with him – these were *her* choices, *her* decisions, and he'd made her no promises, and owed her nothing.

'It's been about five years now,' he said by way of reply to the

question that Lisa had not asked him, his right hand resting idly on the volute that sat between them. ‘She works at Louey’s; you’ve probably seen her. Tall, blonde floor manager.’

Still Lisa was silent, and so Eric kept freestyling, improvising, discovering what he was going to do, what he was going to ask for, as he was doing it.

‘Jenny caught us today, in the truck at Louey’s. That’s why she drove off. I’ll fix things with her, but,’ he paused to glance over his shoulder as he merged onto the highway, ‘Cheryl and I are in a *relationship.* We’re in *love*. We have plans for our future.’ He was not going to tell Lisa about Dogwood – that was like telling someone where your buried treasure was – but he was, he discovered, ready to make some changes.

‘Lisa?’ he said. ‘Do you want to say anything?’

Lisa remained silent, staring down at the black rectangle of her phone.

‘Jenny is leaving for college next year,’ he continued, ‘and you’ve helped us these last years in so many ways. We are both very grateful. But, with Jenny gone, I think you should start to make a plan for what’s next for you. You know, moving out.’

Still Lisa said nothing.

Eric rapped his fingers on the steering wheel to a rhythm only he could hear. They drove in silence for the eight minutes and twenty-four seconds it took them to exit the highway and for Eric to find a place to pull over on Elderpool’s main street, between the Bank of America and the Starbucks.

‘Um, okay,’ he said, the engine idling, ‘so, like you said, you’ll look for her here, and I’ll go to the school and the lake? I’ll try Lucas’ too. Call me if you find her?’

Lisa got out of the truck, shut the door behind her, and walked away without a word.

It had not occurred to Eric to say he was sorry.

Pulling away from the curb, Lisa’s figure diminishing in his rearview mirror, Eric was caught between the relief and elation of unburdening

himself to Lisa, and the fear he felt for his missing daughter – who was possibly even now still speeding around in a car she'd only recently learned to drive, full of anger. The man in him, *Cheryl's man*, felt only freedom and possibility, while the father in him, *Jenny's dad*, felt only fear and dread. There was a third sliver of his being, too. Always there, a splinter in his soul, a seed lodged between his teeth, that was perpetually *Brynn's husband* – Brynn's cuckolded, jilted, abandoned husband – and this part of him remained, as always, enraged, sword drawn. This situation was, after all, *entirely* her fault.

Heading in the direction of Lucas' house, he turned his thoughts to Jenny. *I'll fix things with her*, he'd just told Lisa, but what were the *things* exactly, and what was really in his power to fix?

How had she found out about Brynn's pregnancy? He had only kept it from her to protect her. But had Jenny seen it differently? Clearly the news had upset her greatly. But *why* exactly? Did she see herself, what, flying to Paris to reunite with Brynn? Changing diapers and holding her baby sister in her arms? Forgiving Brynn for all she'd done simply because she'd produced a child? *Here, Jenny, hold this little bundle of joy and forget how I left you when you were not even five years old, how I stopped calling years ago, how I pretended you didn't exist* . . . Eric slammed his fists into the steering wheel, scowling.

He took a left onto Lucas' street. It was 7:30 am, just about the time Jenny would normally be leaving for school, and Eric pulled up to the curb just as Lucas stepped out of his front door, breathing into his cupped hands, slouching and gangly.

'Hey, Mr. Mitchell,' Lucas said, clear confusion on his face, 'is everything okay?'

'Have you seen Jenny this morning?' Eric kept the engine running, his foot hovering over the accelerator.

'Um, no, not yet,' Lucas said, looking like he was in trouble for something he didn't know he'd done. 'I'm just heading to school now.'

'She hasn't called or texted you?'

Lucas pulled his phone out of his back pocket, glanced at it and said, 'No. Is everything –'

'Can you please try calling her?' Eric interrupted.

‘Um, sure, um . . .’ Lucas pressed his finger to the screen of his phone and Eric could hear the ringing, and after a few seconds they both heard Jenny’s voicemail message kick in. Lucas shook his head apologetically. ‘Is she okay?’

‘Yes, I’m sure she’s fine, we just have our wires crossed this morning.’ Eric was already rolling up his window. ‘If you hear from her, please tell her to call me right away.’

He drove to the lakeshore, where he knew teenagers sometimes milled about before school, vaping on the picnic benches and being generally obnoxious. He’d done the same thing – the lake had always been a magnet for teenage loitering – although back then it had been plain old cigarettes. This morning, however, the area was sparsely populated. A trio of women in athletic wear pushing strollers and a lone jogger were the only people he saw. He continued along the road which would take him to Elderpool High, but he knew that storming into the school would be the worst thing he could do, so instead he drove up and down the rows of cars in the parking lot, looking for Lisa’s minivan, which was nowhere to be seen.

He tried ringing Jenny again but there was no answer. As he ended the call, his phone pinged with a message from Lisa: *She’s not downtown come get me in front of the bank.*

When he spotted Lisa she had a coffee cup in one hand and the other stuffed into her pocket. She wasn’t dressed warmly enough, he realized. He should have offered her his coat earlier. She was, after all, scouring the streets of downtown Elderpool looking for *his* wayward child. Sure, he wanted her to move out, but he wasn’t an asshole. Mary was always assuring him he was kind and good.

Lisa strode toward the truck, shoulders back, at a rapid clip. Was she smiling at him? ‘Hey, I’ve just been thinking,’ she said as she jumped into the cab.

‘Yes?’

‘Yeah, so, *no*, Eric. I’m not moving out of the house. I’m not going anywhere. My *garden* is there. It’s my home, and I’ve earned it. You can move out if you want to. I’m not leaving.’

Part Four

Chapter Twenty

As Jenny drove, clarity came. Her dad always said this about driving, that it helped him think. So he was right about that, at least. Her hand ached where she'd pounded it on the window of his truck. She'd run through multiple scenarios whereby she confronted everyone – her dad, Lisa, her grandparents, her mother – letting everyone know how much they'd let her down, how much she felt they owed her, how angry she was with all of them. But after she'd imagined all of those conversations – let loose the worst, meanest things she could think to say in the privacy of her thoughts – her rage dissipated, and a clearer, smarter thought came into focus: *I need to get away from here.* She exhaled, steeled herself, and brought her rage from a boil down to a simmer.

She decided she'd go home and take a day to herself in her room and finally start her essay. She would take a step toward her future, her escape plan. She would figure out what the fuck the Spirit of Our Times was. She assumed Lisa would be there; after all, Jenny had marooned her when she'd taken the minivan. Maybe even her dad would be home now. But she would refuse to talk to them. She would walk right past them into her room, lock the door if she needed to. She owed them nothing.

But her dad's truck wasn't there when she pulled up. And when she opened the door and walked inside, she could instantly sense that Lisa wasn't there. *They're probably out looking for me*, she thought, and didn't feel bad at all. Instead, she felt a giddy kind of capriciousness. She walked into the kitchen for a glass of water and saw the broken clock on the floor, the banana bread reduced to fragments. She stopped and stared, and for the first time in a long time she felt bad for Lisa. She had baked this bread for her, Jenny knew. She had been worried about her this morning, trying to help. It wasn't

Lisa's fault that her mom was pregnant. But she couldn't think too much more about that now. She considered cleaning up the mess, but decided that she wasn't ready for the physical proof of the mess of her life to be swept away. Rather, she found the image of the smashed clock and the ruined bread oddly validating. And besides, she wanted to stay angry. She needed her anger to keep her focused.

She knew her dad and Lisa would never tell her the truth about anything, especially about her mom. Lisa would always want to dilute the truth, to avoid upsetting Jenny at all costs. Didn't she know how patronizing that was? Her dad, on the other hand, wouldn't tell Jenny anything that might possibly soften her to her mom, or that might make him the bad guy. And, she realized, at some point in the last hour she'd determined that she would not be responding to her mother. *Fuck that*, she thought, *if she didn't want me before she can't have me now*. Let her feel the wall of silence, the gut punch of abandonment. Let her feel small and insignificant. For the unborn sister? She felt nothing but a cold detachment.

But Jenny still had questions. So. Many. Questions. She still needed to understand how her life had turned into such a dumpster fire. And if she wanted to know the truth about her mom and dad, about what had happened all those years ago, she'd have to find out for herself. So she would look for clues. She would once and for all find the answers she needed, and then she'd leave them all in her wake.

Jenny couldn't think of the last time she'd been in Lisa's room. It wasn't a place she'd ever craved entry to. The first thing she noticed was the smell: a sickly sweetness, different from the rest of the house, permeated Lisa's incredibly neat and tidy private domain. It was a good-sized room, so even with the queen bed there was space for a plush blue corduroy recliner next to the windows overlooking the garden in the backyard, and for Lisa's green yoga mat, unrolled, on the other side of the bed. Butted up against the foot of the bed was an antique-looking trunk. A single bedside table with a single drawer completed the furnishings. There was a large, leafy plant in every

corner and a spider plant hanging from a ceiling hook. Jenny approached the trunk and ran her hand along the engravings – vines and flowers. There was a neat stack of books on the trunk, all with titles having to do with finding joy, love, meaning and purpose. She carefully removed the books and lifted the lid of the trunk – the child in her hoping for the golden glow of pirates' treasure – but instead she found neatly folded quilts, nothing more.

On the wall over Lisa's bed were three framed prints, each one a single word in flouncy, gold embossed cursive: *Dream*, *Love* and *Yes!* Jenny sat lightly on the edge of Lisa's bed and examined the items on her bedside table. She picked up a candle – the origin of the odor that had assaulted her when she first came in. The wick had never been lit and the wax was covered in a fine mist of dust: *Frosted Cinnamon Rolls*, the label read, and Jenny felt queasy. There was a fat glittery pink pen with a fluffy pink pom-pom hanging off the clicker. A plastic jar of melatonin. Mango hand cream from The Body Shop. An empty mug with a block of text that read: *Lord give me coffee to change the things I can & wine to accept the things I can't.*

She picked up a book entitled *Find your Path: A Workbook for Awakening Your Feminine Power*. Jenny thumbed through it and found page after page of Lisa's neat handwriting where she'd filled in blanks and journaled under specific prompts. *If I was an animal, I'd be a* _____. Lisa had written *bird*. In the blank space beneath the instruction *Write About When You Feel The Most Alive!* Lisa had written about gardening, about the soil under her fingernails, how excited she got when a seedling sprouted, or when she ate a tomato from her own vine, warm from the sun.

On another page, the instruction read: *Who Is In Your Tribe?* Beneath it was a short list of names, no longer than Jenny's thumbnail: *Porter, Eric, Jennifer, Hetty, Lori.* Lisa had drawn a tiny heart over the *i* in Jennifer. Jenny knew, from being dragged along with Lisa over the years, that Hetty was the owner of Elderpool Plants & Seeds, and that Lori taught Zumba at the Elderpool gym. She wondered – and doubted – whether Hetty and Lori considered Lisa a part of *their* tribes. A profound sadness washed over Jenny then, a sadness steeped in pity. Everything in Lisa's room struck Jenny as so desperate, so undeveloped – as if Lisa was in a constant state of revision, studying

herself, trying to figure out how to *be*. Jenny was desperate to believe that once you were as old as Lisa was, you'd know.

She slid open the small bedside-table drawer, expecting something embarrassing like a vibrator or lube. Jenny knew about these things – you couldn't come of age in the era of the internet and *not* know. She also knew that her dad came into Lisa's room from time to time, which they tried to hide from her. Looking around the room now, she couldn't imagine him in here, among all these acutely female, overtly seeking things. She shook her head, trying to dislodge the mental image of her dad and Lisa having sex. In the drawer, what Jenny found instead were unremarkable and wholly predictable artifacts: a remote control, a few bobby pins, a couple of crinkled receipts. But then she saw, tucked at the back, a plain white envelope. She pulled it out and saw that it was fat with photographs. She pulled out the entire stack, their glossy finish a little sticky to the touch. Jenny rarely saw actual printed photos – they were an old-timey novelty.

The first photo was of a young – five or six? – Lisa and Porter, sitting side by side, their faces covered in frosting, a demolished birthday cake in front of them; replace the frosting with blood and they'd look like little lion cubs enjoying their first antelope. Lisa had been so cute, Jenny thought. Her round face, her open smile, her short bob, her cornflower-blue gingham dress. It struck Jenny that this was the same age that she herself had been, give or take, when her mom left her. She moved the photo to the back of the stack and looked at the next one. Lisa and Porter again, a little older, holding balloons at an amusement park. More of Lisa and Porter – first day of kindergarten, astride bicycles, hitting a piñata, in front of an aquarium, a large grouper with an astonishing underbite photobombing them from behind.

And then there was her mother.

Jenny's first reaction was anger that nobody had warned her that she was about to be triggered, that her mother's youthful teenage face was about to pop out at her. She was so used to being warned before being presented with anything uncomfortable. Then she remembered that she was snooping, looking through Lisa's private belongings, and that she'd brought the shock on herself.

She set the rest of the stack down next to her, so she could hold

this one photo with both hands, lightly pinching the corners like she'd just pulled it out of developer fluid. Her mom and Lisa, dressed in baggy jeans and t-shirts, flannels tied around their waists. They had their arms slung around each other's shoulders and looked like they'd been caught mid-laugh. Her mother was leaning in toward the camera, pointing at whoever held it, her mouth a wide oval of delight. Jenny figured they were about the age she was now, seventeen, maybe sixteen. Her mother looked like a young, nineties version of the woman she still was, unmistakable with her stormy hair and her enviable features. But Lisa, God, Lisa looked so different now.

The Lisa in the picture looked more like the Auntie Lisa Jenny remembered, faintly, from before her mom left. The palpable discomfort in her body, the hand that wasn't around her mom's shoulder yanking down the corner of her t-shirt, lest she show her stomach. Her hair was bone straight and looked lank and oily; her skin was red with acne. That must have been hard, Jenny thought, to be best friends with her mother. To be forever in the shadow of a small, human sun.

There were twenty-four – Jenny counted – more photographs of her mom and Lisa together. Always smiling, always happy. There was a photo of Brynn holding baby Jenny, and one of Lisa holding baby Jenny. Jenny squinted at her infant face, scanning for any awareness in this proto-self of what was going to happen – but all she detected was the bewildered features of a being wholly at the mercy of everyone around her.

Something occurred to Jenny then as she looked through the photograph into the past: her mother had been an only child, *just like her*. Her mother had known what it was like when your parent gave the lion's share of their time to a store, *just like her.* And her mother had ended up with Lisa as a kind of stand-in family, just like – in a certain kind of way – Jenny had too. And her dad! God, her mom *must* have known what a mess he really was, deep down. And still, she'd left Jenny with him. She thought through it all again, and then once more, and then she was sure: her mom had abandoned her in a replica of her own life. *Fuck.* Jenny felt sadder than she'd ever felt before. And she sensed another feeling underneath the sadness, something that reminded her of how she felt on the basketball court when the stakes

were high and the intensity was rising, and part of her wanted to stay in the battle and win and part of her wanted to run off the court and hide: *fight or flight?*

Jenny put the photos back where she found them. Careful not to leave any trace of her presence, she smoothed out the comforter on the bed where she'd been sitting, backed out of Lisa's room, shutting the door, and continued down the hall to her father's room. She felt like a detective in a movie, searching a crime scene without a warrant, following a hunch too strong to play by the rules.

She hesitated outside her dad's door. Privacy was a big deal to her dad. But, Jenny reasoned, privacy was about trust. You granted the people you loved privacy because you trusted them. Even her father's rules adhered to this metric – as long as Jenny didn't break her father's trust, she was allowed the privacy of an iPhone, a laptop, and permitted to go to parties or stay at her friends' houses. Break the trust, lose the privacy. Because *privacy* was a privilege. Jenny no longer trusted her father, so he'd lost the privilege of his privacy – easy as that. Jenny opened his door.

Unlike Lisa's room, her father's room was dark, curtains drawn, and simply smelled like her dad, which was the smell of her life, and it filled her with unexpected comfort. She was flooded with memories of sitting on his foot while he walked, pretending not to know where she was. Of being lifted into his arms. Of crying into his neck. And it was in this moment, standing in her father's bedroom, inhaling his scent, that she felt the last vestige of her childhood slip away.

Because it was just a smell, she understood, nothing to get all emotional about.

Just nostalgia.

Just her brain reacting.

His scent – no matter how familiar, no matter how precious to her, no matter the fact that she knew in some deep part of herself that someday when he was dead and gone she would give her left arm for just one more whiff – it wasn't *him*, it wasn't *enough.* Her dad was gone to her, and had been for some time. He had gone somewhere dark in himself. He hated so much of the world that Jenny was just getting ready to leap into. He hated whole groups of people she couldn't wait to meet. Hated places she hoped to go. Hated ideas she was just

starting to understand. Hated words she hoped to speak. He hated women, she had sensed for a long time, and she was becoming one, *was* one. It was only a matter of time before he hated her, too.

She stepped further into his room. She hazily remembered when this was her mom and dad's room. When she'd sat on this bed with her mother. When her mother's things had suffused the room with femininity. Now, the bed was unmade and one of her dad's socks hung off the side of the mattress. Her heart lurched as she saw the edge of Ginger's old doggie bed, peeking out from under her dad's bed. It touched her that he'd kept it, but didn't soften her. She slid open the closet doors. Inside hung a few coats, a flannel or two, one dinner jacket and some Louey's polos. There was so much extra room, so many unused hangers. Again she felt her love for her dad wrestle with her anger – how could you be mad at someone when even their clothes seemed lonely?

But then she remembered the woman in the truck with him this morning. Who was she? Did she know how much hate her dad had in his heart? He was most certainly not lonely. Fuck his clothes. The feeling she'd had in Lisa's room surged through her again: *fight or flight?*

His bedside table told no story. It was like a bedside table in a hotel – everything was impersonal. An alarm clock, a television remote, and a bible. Jenny half expected a room-service menu. She opened the drawer: empty. She made her way to his chest of drawers, remembering when it had towered over her; now the top of the dresser came to her rib cage. She slid open the first three drawers: pants, shorts, t-shirts, socks and underwear. *God, my dad is boring*, she thought, and then she slid open the top drawer. *Ta-da!* Jackpot.

Jenny was almost afraid to touch anything, so unnerving and unexpected were the things she saw. There was an American flag money clip with what looked to be hundreds of hundred-dollar bills. His passport, *her* passport – which she didn't even know she had, they'd never left the country – was he planning on taking them somewhere? There was a pornographic magazine which featured a woman with enormous breasts, a bandolier full of bullets crisscrossed her torso while she held an assault rifle in her hands, nails like red talons. Is this what her dad was into? Is this what he thought was

beautiful? She picked up the handle of a knife and pulled it out of its brown leather sheath. She knew nothing about knives, but even she could tell it was a serious blade, made to do damage. It was all so troubling.

Tucked into the back of the drawer she found a wooden box, plain and unadorned. Jenny pulled it out and opened it. Inside was a Ziploc bag, and inside of that she found a set of keys, each one with a different-colored tag, on which her father had written in his untidy scrawl: *dogwood front door*, *dogwood back door*, *dogwood shed*, *truck spare*. She didn't have to wonder what the fuck *dogwood* was for long, because the next item she pulled from the bag was a map, on which the route between Elderpool and Dogwood had been highlighted in yellow. Her dad had also made some notes in a bright red Sharpie: *look for the orange fabric, turn left.* And under that he'd written, *bunker 11408*. Jenny recognized her birthday. *What is all of this?* Jenny couldn't guess, but what she did know – quickly and cunningly – was that it was important. She put the keys and the map back into the Ziploc bag and stuffed it into the pouch of her hoodie which made her feel pregnant with a secret – the irony of which actually made her smile. She closed the empty box, put it back where she'd found it, shut the drawer and left the room.

Dogwood. What was in Dogwood? What was to the left of the orange fabric? She had a million questions, and something told her she'd find answers there. So, in the strategic, ruthless, zealous way that only teenage girls can, Jenny made a new plan: she chose flight.

Years later, Jenny would look back on the series of events that transpired after she tipped the first domino and think of it as the greatest things she ever pulled off. But in the moment, she was running on adrenaline, trusting her gut and exerting pure, concentrated will. She didn't have a Plan B.

She considered taking Lisa's van again, but something about her bedroom had left Jenny feeling sorry for her, and leaving Lisa stranded for the second time that day felt a bit like kicking a puppy. But the

thought of taking her dad's precious truck – for which she now had a set of keys – and imagining how angry it would make him . . . utterly delighted her. So, the first thing she did was text Lucas: *Come pick me up by the bus stop near my house will explain when u get here. Hurry.* And then, realizing she hadn't apologized for her behavior at the lake last night, she texted again: *I'm sorry for yesterday btw i have a lot on my mind atm will tell u ltr.*

She emptied her backpack of books and replaced them with enough clothes to share with Kimber and Yol. She stuffed in her toothbrush and a few toiletries, and finally, the Ziploc bag. Then, backpack over her shoulder, she sprinted to the bus stop around the corner. She couldn't risk her dad and Lisa getting home before Lucas arrived.

While she waited, she texted Kimber, Yolanda, Trent and Adam: *Lucas and I will pick you up in fifteen minutes at 7-Eleven. Trust me go now.* The 7-Eleven was across the street from the school campus and it was where they often went during lunch to buy Flamin' Hot Cheetos and glazed Krispy Kreme donuts. She knew they would all find a way to sneak out of class and meet her and Lucas. She was *willing* it. And then she texted her dad: *I need to talk to u meet u at your office*.

Moments later, Lucas pulled up in his Corolla. Jenny got in and put her backpack on the floor between her feet. 'Your dad's looking for you,' Lucas said. 'What's going on?'

'Don't worry about him,' she said, unzipping her backpack and retrieving the map. 'We're going to throw a party.' She decided this as she said it. Sure, she had her private reasons for wanting to follow the map, to find Dogwood, but why shouldn't they have a party, too? She instructed him to drive to the 7-Eleven to get the others. She was smiling, feeling a little deranged, but then she saw that Lucas was smiling too, so Jenny laid out her proposal.

'Show me the map,' Lucas asked her when they stopped at a red light. She unfolded it and handed it across to him.

'So we, what, follow this map, and break into your dad's other house?'

'I don't know if it's a house or what. Don't even know if it's my dad's. But worth a try, right? And we're not *breaking* in,' she dangled

the keys enticingly, ‘technically speaking.’

Lucas pulled up to the 7-Eleven and Jenny’s heart swelled when she saw the others waiting there. The four of them squeezed comically into the back seat. ‘Don’t worry,’ Jenny said over her shoulder, ‘my dad’s truck seats six.’ And then to Lucas, ‘Drive to Louey’s, but park way back by the carwash.’ As they drove, she filled the rest of them in: secret map, keys, party. They were all too excited and bewildered to ask any questions.

When they pulled into the Louey’s parking lot, Lucas was careful to cut a wide arc away from the building and park in the shadows by the carwash, and Jenny was relieved to see that her dad’s truck wasn’t in his spot yet. She wanted to actually see him go inside, lest she risk a repeat of the morning’s events.

They waited. For a few moments, nobody spoke. Then, Kimber said, ‘Um, Jenny, I’m down for whatever this is, but what *is* this?’ Jenny fumbled with the ring of stolen keys until she found the one labeled *truck spare*. She held it up.

‘Steal your dad’s truck,’ Yol said. ‘That’s your plan?’

‘Honestly, you guys, fuck my dad. I cannot even begin to tell you how much I hate him. If we get caught or whatever, he doesn’t have a leg to stand on. Trust me.’

‘Jen, what happened?’ Lucas asked, carefully.

‘I don’t want to talk about it now, okay? But trust me, I’m not scared of my dad. Let’s just go have a fucking party. We’ll come back tomorrow.’

Adam was about to say something when Jenny held her hand up. ‘He’s here.’ They all watched as Jenny’s dad pulled into his spot. Jenny held her breath as he got out of the truck, and hastily made his way inside. ‘Go! Go! Go!’ Jenny yelled, and they all jumped out of Lucas’ car and ran across to the Louey’s parking lot. As she ran, Jenny pressed the unlock button on the key fob and heard the familiar *be-beep*. She hurled herself into the driver’s seat as everyone else clambered inside; Kimber in the middle seat next to her, Lucas by the window, and Yol, Trent and Adam in the back. Jenny adjusted the seat, then put the key in the ignition and released the parking brake with her foot, like she’d watched her dad do thousands of times. She didn’t let on how nervous she was to be at the wheel of this tank,

which she had never driven herself. She put it in reverse and, surprising herself with her maneuvering, sped out of the parking lot, onto the main street, and then three minutes later, onto the highway. 'Fuck!' they all yelled, laughing wildly.

'What is *this*?' Lucas said, pulling something out of the passenger seat footwell. Jenny looked over and saw her dad's precious piece of wood in Lucas' hands.

'Nothing,' she said, 'just put it under the seat.' But she felt a pang of anxiety. It was one thing to steal her dad's truck – but to steal his wood, the object he seemed more attached to than anything else in the world, felt like a dangerous boundary to cross. She considered going back and throwing it out the window so at least he'd have it – whatever it really was – taking it with them now felt like kidnapping. But her nervousness was quickly replaced by a stronger feeling: power. For the first time in her life, she felt like she had some. So she sped past the exit that would circle back to Elderpool, and kept going.

While they drove, Yolanda texted her mother that she'd be staying at Kimber's after school that night while Kimber texted her mother that she'd be staying at Jenny's. The three boys did the same with their mothers. Jenny didn't care enough to text anyone anything.

Chapter Twenty-One

It wasn't supposed to snow. The news reports said it was the earliest snow that Paris had seen in forty-seven years. It was the first week of October, and even the Champs-Élysées, along which Brynn scurried, seemed affronted by and unprepared for the unexpected cold. She was late to meet Jillian. Her morning had gotten off to a strange start when she'd overslept, only to be awoken by Lola vomiting on the carpet of their bedroom. She'd eaten some chicken bones out of the rubbish bin, little menace, and was paying the price. Tariq had agreed to stay home and monitor her while Brynn kept her breakfast plans with Jillian, but then Brynn had spilled juice all over her blouse when she was hit with a strong Braxton Hicks contraction, and she'd had to change at the last minute.

She wasn't worried, though. Jillian wouldn't care. Jillian would be sipping her latte, reading something *of note* on her iPad, her stylish red-framed glasses perched on the end of her nose. She wouldn't mention Brynn's lateness, she'd simply greet her in the same way she always did: with a kiss on both cheeks, a quick but solid embrace, followed by a long moment of engaged eye contact during which she'd hold both of Brynn's arms in her strong grip and tell her it was *so good* to see her. Even if she'd only just seen her the day before. And, Brynn knew, she meant it.

Jillian often told Brynn that it was her German father, Otto Bauer, who had taught her how to show affection. 'I bet you thought that because of all the cheek-kissing, the French are more affectionate with their children,' Jillian told her once during one of their long walks along the Seine, 'and that Germans would be more strict, more formal. But that's not true at all.' She explained that French parents were far more detached, more disciplinarian than their German counterparts. 'In France children are just tiny adults. We cut them very little slack.'

Brynn had seen this with her own eyes. French mothers especially seemed far less tolerant of kids acting out or throwing tantrums than Brynn had been with Jenny, and they seemed to fiercely cling to their own independence. 'My *maman* loved me, there is no question there, but she didn't feel a great need to fawn over me or to shower me with affection. Her love was indirect,' Jillian shared, 'but with Papa it was direct. He would point at me and say, "Jillian Bauer, I think you are remarkable," even if all I was doing was lacing up my shoes!' Brynn privately thanked Otto Bauer every time she was the recipient of Jillian's unambiguous affection.

Brynn rounded the corner onto the Avenue Montaigne in the eighth arrondissement, walking past the Chanel, Dior and Fendi stores where she regularly shopped, and rapped on the window of the Café Joanna where she saw – as predicted – Jillian, coffee cup in one hand, iPad in the other, lost in her thoughts. Jillian put down her cup and device, and gave Brynn a ridiculously silly double thumbs-up – which Brynn understood to be a congratulations for her private triumph of walking apace in the snow.

For the first few winters in Paris, Brynn had been terrified of slipping on the ice. The last time she'd slipped, it had cost – and gained – her everything, shaken up her life like a snow globe. She didn't want to roll those die again.

Inside the warm café, the elegantly dressed host effortlessly unwrapped Brynn from her coat and walked her toward the table where Jillian was already on her feet. Two kisses, one hug, both arms squeezed and meaningful eye contact made, and then, 'Darling, you were practically running! Well done! Though do be careful with my niece, won't you?' Jillian placed both of her hands on the sides of Brynn's protruding torso and directed three precise air kisses toward Sabine. 'Sit, sit,' Jillian said, 'I've ordered for you.'

'Oh, thank God,' Brynn said, lowering herself carefully onto the chair across from Jillian. 'I'm starving.' They loved this café. It was, as Jillian liked to say in heavily accented English, *ovur ze toppe* – a tourist attraction, but that's why they came. It was like something out of a storybook about Marie Antoinette, minus the beheading. Everywhere there were polished silver tiered trays bursting with tiny pastel frosted cakes and jewel-toned macarons. The customers sat

under high-arched windows hung with flowing green and white–striped satin drapery, reclining like ladies-in-waiting in their sumptuous chairs rimmed with gold leaf that always made Brynn feel like Alice in Wonderland, grown small, her feet dangling like a child's. It was the first place Jillian had brought her after they'd met on the plane. It was where Brynn had signed her La Belle Visage contract with a Montegrappa pen, worth more than the deal Jillian had wrangled for her. But, more importantly, it was where Brynn and Jillian bared their souls to each other, at least once a week, over a breakfast of croissants and Gruyère omelets.

They brought each other up to speed on their respective mornings – Jillian's had been as rife with blunder as Brynn's had, and they both agreed that the freakishly early snow must have wrought havoc on the lives of all Parisians – before turning to more serious topics, namely: Sabine's rapidly approaching birth, the presence of the Tahiri women, and Brynn's urgent desire to reconnect with Jenny. Brynn handed her phone across to Jillian and watched her friend grimace as she read the text exchange from the previous night.

'Oh, Brynn, the *emojis* . . . why?' Jillian said, her pointer finger tapping the phone daintily as she scrolled to the end of the message chain.

'I know . . .' Brynn winced. 'I don't know what I was thinking.'

'The champagne and the birthday hat!' Jillian was laughing as she handed Brynn back her phone.

'Don't laugh, it's not funny.' Brynn glanced up to smile at the waitress who had just placed her peppermint tea in front of her. Oh, what she wouldn't do for a double-shot americano, she thought, as she enviously watched Jillian take the first frothy sip of her second cappuccino.

'It's a *little bit* funny,' Jillian tried, cocking her head.

Brynn frowned at her.

'Okay, it's not funny,' Jillian decided, and made a very serious face. '*Pas du tout*. It is *Verschlimmbesserung*, though.'

Brynn rolled her eyes. 'Go on, what does it mean?' Jillian was always peppering their conversations with complex German words. Jillian loved that you could use one German word – even if it was a hundred syllables long – to describe what would take many words in

French or English, and still not be as poetic.

'*Verschlimmbesserung*,' Jillian repeated, 'means that in your attempt to make something better, you have made it worse.'

'That's exactly what I did,' Brynn said, smiling in spite of herself. 'I had one chance to tell her, and I *Verschlimm* . . . whatevered it!' She stirred honey into her tea. 'I should have insisted we speak on the phone; I think if she could have heard my voice it would have been better.'

'Have you heard from her since?'

'No.'

'Eric?'

'No.'

Their food arrived, and they paused their conversation to slather their perfect croissants in butter and raspberry jam, while the waiter ground pepper the size of small pebbles onto their eggs. Finally, through a mouthful of omelet, Jillian asked, 'What is the best-case scenario here, Brynn? With Jenny?'

'Well,' Brynn considered this for a moment, holding her croissant aloft. 'I suppose that the best-case scenario would be that Sabine,' Brynn placed her other hand absent-mindedly on her stomach and rubbed in little circles, 'would be a kind of bridge.'

'A bridge?'

'Yes, like, she could close the gap between Jenny and me; she would be a reason for us to rebuild our relationship.'

'Hmm,' Jillian said, and Brynn knew that a hard truth was incoming by the way Jillian pursed her lips, 'and who exactly are you to Jenny in this new relationship?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, Brynn, who are you *offering* to be for your seventeen-year-old daughter at this particular time in *your* life, in *her* life, when you have a newborn baby on the way? I mean, imagine if Jenny decided she did want to reconnect with you, that she wanted to come here, perhaps, to make up for the lost years. Could you actually do that for her? Do you want a teenager and a baby? What can you feasibly supply?' Jillian had abandoned her meal for the moment, and had both her elbows on the table as she leaned toward Brynn, who was still holding her croissant in the air as though she'd magically conjured it

into existence.

Over the last twelve years, Jillian had graduated from *The Secret*. These days she spoke less of the Law of Attraction and the Power of Positive Thinking, and more about the Power of *No*, of boundaries and accountability. She didn't quote Rhonda Byrne and Eckhart Tolle anymore, instead she peppering their conversations with Brené Brown and Glennon Doyle quotes. She spoke often about vulnerability, personal responsibility and core values. Brynn hadn't kept pace and, if she was honest, she felt threatened by these new frameworks and philosophies. She preferred the old ones from a decade ago, the ones that told her that her *only* responsibility was to think positively and that as long as she did so, all would be well. Those ideas had given her some emotional camouflage. But now, Jillian wanted Brynn to answer for herself, to be deliberate about the choices she was making.

'I'm offering her Sabine,' Brynn said unconvincingly, already losing her footing.

'That is a very big job to give a newborn baby, don't you think? *Hello!*' Jillian mimed cradling a baby, looking down at her empty, rocking arms. 'Welcome to the world, little bean sprout – *petite pousse* – now, do me a favor, would you, and smooth things over with my estranged teenage daughter who lives in America!'

'Okay, okay,' Brynn said, putting her hands up like a fugitive, 'I get it. Yes, it's a big job for a baby.' She had known that Jillian would ask her hard questions, it was what she'd come to depend on her for. Jillian, who was, as she described it, *child-free by choice* but a supremely great aunt – a role she was particularly passionate about. She had even participated in a roundtable discussion on France 24 after a LinkedIn post she'd written on the topic went viral. Her thesis was, in essence, that the world needed child-free women as much as it needed mothers. Not, she was careful to point out, that all child-free women *wanted* to be engaged aunts, and that was okay too, but Jillian was sick of the false binary she'd been offered when she was still in her childbearing years: jubilant mother, or pitiable non-mother. There was a world of choice in between these poles, she argued, and it was time to normalize them. And Jillian did take her aunting seriously; she had a handful of biological nieces and nephews, and another handful comprising the children of close friends. To anyone lucky enough to

call her Tante Jillian, she was devoted, interested and invested.

'Do you want to know something bizarre?' Jillian asked, picking up her fork again. Brynn, finally eating her croissant, nodded for her to continue. 'I read an article the other day about Joni Mitchell. You know who I'm talking about?'

'Of course,' Brynn said. She loved Joni Mitchell. Tariq had her entire oeuvre in vinyl, and Brynn had a warm memory of the two of them lying on the floor, wrapped in a duvet, their limbs locked in *après le sexe* bliss as a light snow fell outside their window while Joni sang to them about ice-cream castles in the air.

'*Bon*,' Jillian continued, pointing the tines of her fork at Brynn. 'Did you know that Joni Mitchell had a baby that she gave up for adoption?' Brynn's unblinking stare conveyed that she did not. Jillian went on. 'Well, she did. She was twenty. She was poor. She didn't have any support and couldn't see a way through to being a good mother to her baby. So she did a very brave thing, Brynn. She allowed someone else to be her child's mother, and she went on to become, well, Joni Mitchell. Can you imagine what we would be without her? Without the *Blue* album?' Brynn shook her head. 'But this is what I want to tell you, Brynn.' Jillian narrowed her eyes and forced Brynn to look directly into her serious gaze. 'The article made a big song and dance about what she'd done, why she'd done it, what a scandal it would have been in the sixties had it gotten out – she kept it a secret, you see. And then, there was a kind of forgiveness arc, because Joni eventually sought out her daughter, they reentered each other's lives decades later, and the article took the position that things had come full circle, that Joni could be forgiven her sins because she had given us so much of herself creatively, and had ultimately, in some way, returned – not as a mother per se but as a presence, flesh and blood – to her adult daughter's life. So we, the public, get to have *our* Joni Mitchell, and we can say, "Ah, we don't have to judge her, because she was so young, and it was so long ago, and she gave us so much, and she's made amends!" Voilà! Resolution. No hard thinking required on our part.'

Brynn had lost the thread. She shook her head, and was about to ask Jillian how this story related to her and Jenny when Jillian continued. 'Did you notice what I didn't mention, Brynn? What the

article didn't mention? Or, rather, *who* the article didn't mention?'

Brynn was in no mood to be quizzed or talked to like a child, even if Jillian was her closest friend. She exhaled loudly. 'Just tell me, Jillian.'

'The father!' Jillian said, a little too loudly, and Brynn noted other diners looking at them askance. Brynn put a shushing finger to her lips and Jillian rolled her eyes, dismissing their fellow patrons with a wave. 'What I am *saying*,' Jillian reached across the table to take Brynn's hand, 'is that *yes*, it's uncommon for women to leave their children. And when they do leave, when they choose a different path for themselves, we make them justify it – we say, oh, well, if you give us enough brilliance, if you give us something we need and love, then we will forgive you. Even better if you can show yourself to have some shred of maternal instinct in you before it's too late. Sure, Joni may not have become who she became if she'd kept her child. And yes, her music is a part of our lives we can't imagine not having – but she didn't *owe* us anything. Nobody wonders whether the father of her child did anything amazing enough to justify leaving his daughter. Nobody wonders how he could have done it or demands to know how he lived with himself because fathers leaving their families is quotidian and banal.'

Jillian had delivered this speech breathlessly, squeezing Brynn's hand a little too hard, and Brynn could feel her eyes welling with tears. Jillian softened her grip and lowered her voice. '*Sure*, far fewer mothers do what you did. Far fewer *wives* do what you did. But I imagine many, *many* women would if they could. You must drop this idea that you have to fix something, because you might end up causing more damage than if you were to just continue doing what you've been doing: living your life. If Jenny wants a relationship with you, let her come to you when she's older, when she's lived some life herself and has some perspective. For now, though, leave her be.'

Brynn looked across the table at this woman who had been her best friend and agent for the past twelve years.

But even in the cocoon of their friendship – the warmest place in the world, as far as Brynn was concerned – there was a lacuna. How could she really expect Jillian to understand this urge to gather both of her daughters to her?

Every year, Brynn's mother sent her a hard copy of Jenny's school photo – always the wallet-size one, never the A4. Brynn took this as an unsubtle dig from Dana Plover, her assumption being that Jenny's face wouldn't be framed and hung on the wall, but would instead be tucked away somewhere small. Once a year, Brynn would tear open the envelope and stare at her daughter's face, one year older, baby fat slowly melting into the angles and planes that would become Jenny's features in full bloom. And each time she gazed at Jenny's face, she felt an explosion rip through her chest. She bore it; this was her penance. She made herself stare back at the picture. Her eldest and first-born daughter's face was like a map of the world where every feature was a red light blinking: *You are here, you are here*. In this nose – in these cheekbones: *You are here, you are here*.

It was only Tariq's face that could bring her world back into focus. Tariq's eyes on hers that could settle her spirit, could still the part of her that would always yearn for Jenny. Tariq's kiss that could hold her in place long enough to remember that *this* was what she'd chosen. But did it have to be her final choice? Now that she herself was so much *more* than she'd been twelve years ago, couldn't she ask for more?

Brynn agreed with Jillian's thesis about not conflating motherhood and womanhood, but still, Jillian had not undergone the metamorphosis of childbirth and motherhood. Nor, Brynn knew, had Jillian committed sacrilege against it. So she could not, therefore, understand Brynn's need for redemption.

'I know what you're thinking.' Jillian looked at her wryly.

'What am I thinking?'

'That I couldn't possibly understand, because I'm not a mother.' Jillian made an *am I right?* face; she didn't take these things at all personally.

'That's exactly what I was thinking.' Brynn couldn't lie to her, and knew she didn't have to.

'Who knows,' Jillian idly folded her napkin, 'maybe you're right. Maybe I don't *completely* understand. But just promise me that you'll think about what I said.'

'I promise,' Brynn said, smiling, and then she turned very serious and asked, 'Dessert?'

Over macarons and tarte tatin, Brynn and Jillian discussed the ongoing passive-aggressiveness of Noor and Assia, who had – to Brynn's abject horror – raised the topic of being in the delivery room with Brynn and Tariq. 'The bitches!' Jillian said, which delighted Brynn. Brynn knew that Jillian would have said 'The bitches!' even if Brynn had told her that Noor and Assia had offered to clean her house and rub her feet, that 'The bitches!' was her standard solidarity response, but still, it made Brynn feel infinitely less alone. Especially considering the fact that Tariq had not immediately shut down their proposal. 'So that's a no?' he'd asked when Brynn had responded that she'd rather give birth live on television than have his mother and sister in the delivery room with them.

'I can't believe he didn't see what a crazy idea that was straight away,' Brynn said, pressing her fingertip into every last morsel of pastry before placing them on her tongue.

'Men,' Jillian said, then switched over to agent mode to ask, 'Are you ready for tomorrow?'

Tomorrow was a big day for Brynn, who had been quietly nervous that a new baby would impact her career somehow. Jillian had secured a *Vogue* cover for Brynn. Having caught wind through the grapevine that *Vogue*'s upcoming issue was going to be a celebration of forty – a 'forty is the new thirty' kind of vibe – Jillian worked all her magic and called in all her favors to convince them that Brynn should be their cover girl. It was to be a semi-nude portrait of Brynn – à la the infamous Demi Moore *Vanity Fair* cover – accompanied by an interview. Brynn hadn't needed convincing, in fact she'd leaped at the chance. She'd known exactly what this would mean for her career. It meant that there was an interest in her beyond La Belle Visage, and this cover was an opportunity to be taken more seriously, to show what she could do with her body; that she could be *editorial* and *narrative* and *haute couture*.

But now, she was feeling less certain, the timing for tomorrow's shoot felt off. Things between her and Tariq still hadn't settled since the dinner with Noor and Assia when she'd shared her desire to reconnect with Jenny. At any other time in their long relationship she would have simply asked him about it. She'd have said, 'I can feel a distance between us,' and that would have been enough for them to

begin the process of figuring it out – like they always did – and come out the other side feeling even closer, even more in love. But this time, when she thought about asking him, she found that she was scared of what the conversation might yield. Scared that he might ask her to stop trying to connect with Jenny, or issue some kind of ultimatum. So, instead, she hoped that time – and her impending due date – would smooth things over.

But it hadn't. And when she'd reminded him that morning that the *Vogue* team would be arriving later that day to set everything up, he'd exhaled and said flatly, 'Oh yeah, that, of course.' She'd been running too late for breakfast with Jillian to get into it with him.

'Yes!' Brynn finally answered Jillian's question. 'I'll meet the team this afternoon so they can get set up, and tomorrow will be great. You'll be there, right?'

'With croissants,' Jillian said, and placed her hand on Brynn's, seeing through her veils, and adding, 'Everything is going to be okay.'

The next morning, Brynn and Tariq sat in their breakfast nook, a small, cozy table between cushioned benches, enclosed on three sides by long, old windows. They rarely sat here, usually preferring to eat casually on the couch or sit on stools around their marble kitchen island, but this was the only part of the apartment that hadn't been transformed into a set for the photo shoot.

Brynn touched the bottom of the windowpane where the glass had grown thick and blurry. When they'd first bought this apartment, the agent had explained to them that the windows – like those in all the other pre-war apartments in the neighborhood – were original, and that the glass had slowly, imperceptibly, flowed downwards, like a waterfall in slow motion. Brynn hadn't known that glass could do that. Tariq had. And at the time Brynn had found his knack for knowing about the quiet beauty of still things to be one of his most endearing qualities. It was one of the most private ways that she loved him.

They adored this apartment. When Brynn had moved to France, she'd had nothing but a suitcase of Elderpool clothes which Jillian had swiftly confiscated from her, saying, 'Let us never speak of this again,'

before taking her shopping for Parisian clothes. Tariq had, over the years before he met Brynn, acquired what she had learned to refer to as *pieces*. Not a couch, but a George Smith *piece*. Not a chair, but a mid-century Cesca *piece*. After they met and purchased this apartment, they hired Aveline Müller, the most sought-after interior decorator in Paris. Their professional lives comprised collaborations with other creative professionals, so why would their home be any different? Tariq had wanted a curated existence, and Brynn was swept up by his keen eye, the way he'd get excited about a cabinet, the way he and Aveline could earnestly discuss the beauty of a cantilever chair or the qualities of vintage leather upholstery. Together, the three of them discovered what kind of *space* Tariq and Brynn would thrive in, what kind of decor would bring out their best selves. It was, Brynn discovered, so much easier to know what you liked when presented with a menu of carefully selected options. Now, there was not an object in their home that didn't have a story. She'd even picked out a china pattern; dahlias and hummingbirds with a gold-leaf rim.

This nook, Aveline Müller had explained, was to be one of their 'patches of comfort', areas thoughtfully installed throughout the flat that were to be used deeply, rather than treated lightly. Their insanely comfortable bed, the ridiculously plush purple shag carpet in the TV room, this breakfast nook. These were to be the places where things could be spilled and trod upon, where you could – and *should* – leave your imprint. Once, many years ago, they'd even made love on this very table. Now, they were trying not to make a mess, looking warily around them at all the lights, screens like giant umbrellas, and other equipment that had been set up around their home.

Opulent bunches of fresh hydrangeas had been placed throughout the flat. Someone had rearranged their bookshelves and shifted their sofa to an odd angle. Chess pieces on what was an otherwise ignored set had been moved to give the impression that Tariq and Brynn were mid-match. Even Lola, who sat on their feet under the table, wore a new red velvet Louis Vuitton collar, her wardrobe for her own *Vogue* debut.

Tariq was reading *Le Monde*. Brynn was scrolling through Instagram. They were both trying to pretend this was normal, that their silence was agreeable, that they had not – for the first time in their

marriage – been unable to make conversation. Normally, under these circumstances, Tariq would be taking this time to check out the lighting kit, to make comments about how the team had set up and what he'd have done differently. He'd be asking for the names of the photographers and the lighting technicians, telling Brynn who he knew, who was good, who wasn't. He'd be excited, as he always was, to be among colleagues. Now, wearing the outfit that had been sent over for him – sweater by Alexander McQueen, slacks by Armani, shoes by Bottega Veneta – he looked ill at ease, put upon.

Hair and makeup would be there in twenty minutes. Brynn knew she shouldn't start a hard conversation when they didn't have the time to finish it, but she couldn't help it. Sabine was kicking incessantly this morning, urgently, as if she was saying *make things right with my papa, please* – so before she could stop herself, the words were out of her mouth. 'Tariq, something is off with us. It's not like us; please tell me what's wrong.'

'You're crying?' he said, and she realized that she was, indeed, crying. It didn't take much these days. Her hormones and emotions were all over the place. He reached across the table and wiped a tear off her cheek with his thumb – there was so much tenderness and familiarity in his touch that she thought, hopefully, that perhaps this wouldn't be a long, hard conversation after all. That, purely by calling it out, she'd already broken the spell. He wiped his tear-wet thumb on his McQueen slacks.

'I'm troubled, Brynn,' he said, sadly.

'I know you are,' she sniffled. 'Ever since dinner. When I talked about Jenny.'

He nodded, folding *Le Monde* in half, bringing his fingertips together in a tented prayer. 'I just,' he began, and then seemed to lose the thread. 'It's hard to explain. I don't know how to.'

'Why? Why is it hard? We always talk to each other, Tariq. The hard and brutal truths, right? Why is this different? I can take it, I promise. But you need to tell me.' She was pleading now, more tears flowing. 'Please pretend I'm not crying. You know I cry all the time now. I promise you I can handle whatever it is.'

He regarded her closely, and she saw that his own eyes had begun to water. The makeup artist was going to have a hell of a time with

their red, puffy eyes. He exhaled and tried again. ‘It’s hard because it shouldn’t *be* hard, do you know what I mean?’ She nodded, not really understanding but wanting him to continue. ‘I know you, Brynn. I know your heart, I know your soul, I know the love that created our Sabine. And I’m troubled, because I feel like maybe there is a part of you that I don’t know.’

Brynn could feel her own face fall and knew her sorrow was written all over her features. Tariq reached across the table for her hand, squeezing it hard, and continued, ‘I am not upset with you about wanting to talk to Jenny,’ he said sternly, ‘that is *not* it. I’m sorry if I made you feel that way. It’s . . . it’s just that . . . I’m sad that I didn’t know that such a . . . a yearning had opened up inside of you. How could I have missed that? And I suppose I felt protective of Sabine. Like, at least for now, while she’s still in your belly, she should be enough. Is that awful?’

Brynn heard the echoes of the conversation she’d had with Jillian at breakfast yesterday. The two people who she trusted most in the world were asking her to reconsider her attempts to reconnect with Jenny, to focus on Sabine and allow her entrance into the world to be as uncomplicated as possible. Maybe they were right, she thought. And besides, it certainly didn’t seem like Jenny wanted to reconnect with her. She would stop, she decided. She would try again later, when Sabine was a little older, and maybe things would go differently then.

‘It isn’t awful,’ she said as she made her ungainly way around to his side of the table, encumbered as she was by her belly and Lola on her feet, and sat down next to him, placing the palm of one hand on his chest, and other on his back, as if she were propping him up. ‘Tariq,’ she said, her mouth close to his ear. ‘You are the best man I have ever known. You are the best husband, and you are going to be the best dad. I love our life. *This* is where I am supposed to be. *This*,’ she picked up his hand and placed it firmly on her belly where Sabine was making her presence known, ‘is my family.’

They both cried then. She, loudly and snottily. He, quietly and with his hand over his face. They cried until they both started laughing. And by the time Jillian let herself in without knocking, as she always did, and yelled ‘Croissants!’ – Tariq had kissed Brynn on the top of her head, on her forehead, on her chin, on both her cheeks, on her neck,

and on her belly.

The photo shoot, it turned out, was the best way for Tariq and Brynn to let the glue of their emotional repair dry. Tariq had watched from a corner of the room, smiling, as Brynn sat for her nude portrait; regal as a queen, her hands framing her belly, her hair glowing. She could read his thoughts, she could translate the smallest shift in his smile, the most imperceptible movement in his eyes or the set of his jaw. She knew he was admiring her, loving her, desiring her. She knew that later, after everyone had gone home, they would tumble into their bed – as much as she was capable of tumbling at the moment – and make love.

When it came time for the two of them to pose for photos together, the director didn't need to tell them to sit closer to each other, for Tariq to put his arm around her, for them to gaze at each other. In between shots, waiting for the photographer to change a lens or move a light, Tariq was whispering in her ear, 'I love you,' and, 'You're so beautiful,' and, 'You're mine,' and, 'I can't wait for Sabine to get here.'

After the photos were done, Brynn sat down across from Sylvie Laurent, the journalist *Vogue* had sent to interview her. It was a standard interview – the same questions generally asked of models: *What items are always in your purse? What are your travel skin-care tips? What is your bedtime routine? Do you use dry shampoo? What is your day on a plate?* And then, staying true to the brief: *How are you approaching pregnancy at forty?*

Brynn saw Tariq leaning against the wall, listening in, smiling. She smiled back at him. She couldn't wait for this to be over. She was desperate to be alone with her husband.

Then, mid-interview, Brynn's phone rang and she saw it was Eric. *He never rings*, Brynn thought. She excused herself and accepted the call.

Eric, agitated and angry, told her that Jenny had been missing for two days and demanded to know if she'd heard from her. His truck was missing, too, he informed her, careful to point out that all of it was

Brynn's fault.

Brynn erupted into panic, and immediately announced to everyone present that she needed to leave. There was a ripple of confusion. Tariq was at her side, trying to get her to hold his gaze and breathe, to tell him what had just happened. But how could she explain it? She had told Jenny about Sabine and now Jenny had disappeared. She felt dizzy, breathless. How had she thought her news would affect Jenny? How could she have been so selfish? Jillian and Tariq had been right – but she'd realized it too late, she had set all of this into motion. On that front, Eric was right, too. Why had she thought she deserved them both? Deserved Jenny? She heard Lisa's voice again – *you never deserved it* – and in that moment, she believed it. *I have to fix this*, she thought. 'I have to go home,' she said weakly, trying to take off her microphone.

'*Mais chérie*,' Sylvie said, her brow creased with worry, 'you *are* home.'

Chapter Twenty-Two

After she made her pronouncement – *I'm not moving out, I'm not going anywhere* – Lisa had been braced for an argument. But before he could respond, Eric got a text from Jenny: *I need to talk to u I'll meet u at your office*. Lisa was relieved to know that Jenny was okay, but she kept it to herself.

'I think I should meet her alone,' Eric said. 'You know, I think she needs her dad.'

Lisa didn't protest as he dropped her back at the house before he headed to Louey's to meet Jenny. Lisa had noticed her minivan parked in the driveway, which didn't make sense. Had Jenny dropped it home as an apology to Lisa? Had she taken an Uber to Louey's? Or the bus? But she found she was too tired to think too much about it. Eric and Jenny didn't consider her, so why should she continue to consider them? She was done helping them, for today at least.

Lisa went straight to her en suite bathroom and had a long, hot shower. She even used the exfoliation scrub Jenny had given her for her birthday, or was it Christmas – or *last* Christmas? Bath products were the only thing that Eric and Jenny ever gave her. Lisa could open a store with the number of body scrubs, bath bombs, face masks, hair treatments and bath salts that were stuffed in the cupboard beneath her sink. Lisa always found thoughtful, personalized gifts for Eric and Jenny – she'd tried to notice what they liked, what they lacked, and planned for weeks, sometimes months in advance. Lisa didn't even particularly like *bathing* to the point of requiring so many accoutrements – but that was the point, wasn't it? Generic gifts for someone who Eric and Jenny clearly saw as the generic woman they lived with. But, after the morning she'd had, Lisa was trying to make everything take a little bit longer. To extend time. Despite the steely conviction she'd felt only an hour ago in Eric's truck, she knew that if

she really intended to stay he'd have to agree, and she couldn't see him doing that. She thought about her garden, of how much of herself she'd mixed into the soil of this place. Even still, she knew that of all the people who lived here her roots were the shallowest. She felt the finality of her time with Eric harden inside her. She needed to make a real plan for herself, one that didn't include him. So, hoping a plan would make itself known to her, she used the scrub; she shaved her legs; she watched a bath bomb dissolve at her feet, its blue dye swirling down the drain; she left the conditioner in her hair for the suggested five full minutes, then rinsed and repeated.

Then, in her fluffy pink robe and slippers, hair wrapped in a towel, she went to the kitchen and carefully swept up the banana bread and fragments of the broken clock. When she was done, she took her time making a pot of tea. When the kettle finally howled, she turned off the stove and slowly poured the hot water over the peppermint-licorice tea bag in her teapot. While it steeped, she gazed out the kitchen window into the backyard.

'What are *you* looking at,' she muttered to the Brynn-tree, which looked down at her from the corner of the yard. 'This is all your fault.' She felt suddenly very tired. Perhaps she should have made an English breakfast tea instead. She felt heavy, leaden; felt the weight of all the time she'd given to Eric and Jenny slung across her shoulders like a dead deer. She was twenty-eight when she'd come to watch a five-year-old Jenny for a weekend, and now she was forty. She'd given Eric and Jenny all of her thirties, and now it was over and her suspicions had been confirmed: All along she'd been the help. Despite all her efforts, she was a guest – a long-term guest, but a guest all the same.

Five years, he'd told her. Five years he'd been with this other woman. He'd told her they were in love, so Lisa could only assume he was having sex with her. She thought about all the times she and Eric had slept together the last five years, over the last twelve years – and never once had he looked her in the eye while he was inside of her. Did he look what's-her-name in the eye? Why even sleep with her at all if he had what's-her-name? Had she always been nothing but a warm body to him? A convenient blow-up doll that also cooked breakfast and folded his socks?

She glanced up at the Brynn-tree again, but she found she couldn't direct her anger in Brynn's direction. Her infatuation with Eric had begun so long ago. Long before Brynn's fall. Long before Brynn left, making it so easy to blame her for everything. Nobody had told Lisa to wait for him for so long. Nobody had promised her that someday, eventually, he would choose her. The only person she could blame was herself. Eric had never lied to her about what he could be for her, what he could provide. She'd lied to herself, and what surprised her most in that moment was how deeply she longed to talk to Brynn about all of it.

The light in the kitchen darkened as a storm cloud passed over the weak sun. She peered out the window and saw that it wasn't a cloud but rather thousands of little starlings. *A murmuration*, Lisa knew. She'd learned the word from Hetty. Lisa craned her neck, staring up at the psychedelic, ever-shifting shape their many synchronized bodies made in the sky. They dipped and folded, expanded and contracted, lunged and lifted with one mind. *How do they know how to do that?* She marveled at the shapes they made, their swift changes in direction, their defiance of gravity. *How do they know their place in the dance?* They belonged to each other with a simplicity and grace that took Lisa's breath away. She watched as they rolled and twisted, black brushstrokes against the flat, gray sky, and Lisa knew then, in the marrow of her bones, that Eric and Jenny were not her flock. The three of them could never move together with such grace, such elegance. Lisa was flockless.

She poured a cup of tea from the teapot, and was about to take it into her bedroom – perhaps she'd do some journaling or a stress-reducing meditation – when the doorbell rang. She made her way to the front door and peeked through the peephole, and there was her brother.

'Porter?' Lisa heard the shock in her voice as she opened the door.

'Hey, sis!' Porter said, and opened his arms wide.

Lisa stepped into his hug, squeezing him while she said, 'What are you doing here?' Before he could answer, she added, 'Come in, come in!'

Porter stepped inside and did the requisite shivering and breathing into his hands that anyone stepping into a warm house from the cold

did. He was wearing a camel-colored trench coat with a gray cashmere sweater, jeans, and very expensive-looking black leather boots. He had grown a little beard, Lisa noticed, and was beginning to lose his hair, his forehead just a little higher than it was the last time she'd seen him.

'Take your shoes off, I've just made tea,' she instructed, and made her way to the kitchen while he pulled off his boots and hung his coat on a hook in the foyer. When Porter walked in, Lisa was pouring him a cup of tea and setting out some cookies on a plate. They sat down across from each other, and Lisa realized that she was very, very happy to see her brother.

'Okay, so what are you doing here? I mean, I'm so happy to see you, but . . .' she shook her head in a *what's up?* fashion, and blew on her tea.

'Didn't you get my text?'

Lisa remembered the text that had come through during Jenny's basketball game. 'I did, but didn't you say you were coming next month?'

'Nope, I said *next Mon* as in *Monday*, as in *today*, and here I am! Don't worry, I'm staying at Mom and Dad's, you don't need to get a room ready for me or anything.'

'Oh, well, amazing! A surprise is even better. What are you doing home? Are Catriona and the girls with you?'

'No, no, they're in London, but we're thinking of coming back for Christmas.' He took a sip of his tea. 'This is nice,' he said.

'Peppermint licorice,' Lisa said, pleased.

'I'm actually here for a funeral,' he explained, reaching for a cookie and then changing his mind. *He's probably gluten free now*, Lisa thought, or sugar free, or nut free, and wondered what other snacks she could serve him.

'Do you remember Robbie Klein?'

Lisa shook her head no.

'Come on, Robbie Klein? Short kid? Really funny? We were on the same hockey team all through junior high. His sister was Pamela, head of the cheer squad?' A sea of possible faces who may or may not have been Robbie and Pamela Klein passed through Lisa's memory, but they only served to remind her that she and Porter had swum in such different social circles in high school, and that she had really only

ever had Brynn.

'No?' Porter continued. 'Well, anyway, he died of cancer. So crazy. Forty years old! Pancreatic. Divorced, one kid. So fucking tragic. I hadn't talked to him in so long but I figured I'd come and pay my respects, see the old gang. I've been feeling a little homesick lately, to be honest.'

'Me too,' Lisa said, wistfully.

'What do you mean?' Porter said, giving in and picking up a cookie, which made Lisa smile. 'You *live* here!' And Lisa realized that it was, indeed, a strange thing to say – that she was homesick when she still lived in the same town she was born in and had lived in her entire life. But she was. Or at least that's what it felt like. And before she could stop herself, she was crying into her tea.

Two more pots of tea – an Earl Grey and a vanilla rooibos blend – and a whole tray of cookies later, and Lisa had filled Porter in on the last decade of her life with more honesty and transparency than she ever had before, even with herself. There was no use lying or sugarcoating the truth with the one person who could see right through her, who at one point had even been able to read her mind as if it were his own. Porter listened intently, his brow furrowed, nodding, at times uttering an empathetic, 'Oh, sis,' or an exasperated, 'Oh, *sis*,' or an incredulous, '*Oh, sis!*' but otherwise not interrupting her until she had brought him all the way up to that very morning, ending with, 'So I guess we're all pretending everything is normal, but none of this is normal, right?'

'Lisa, absolutely none of this is normal,' he said, and then, looking at his watch, he added, 'It's still early here, but it's five o'clock in London. Got any wine?'

'Um, I thought you were a prohibitionist?'

'My defenses were defeated by the quality of European vino,' he said.

'Well, in that case, absofuckinglutely,' Lisa said. 'Let's move into the living room – it's comfier. I'll be right there.' Lisa went and changed out of her robe into some sweats and a hoodie, removed the

towel from her head, and went to the garage to select the best wine they had from their version of a cellar – a thirty-seven-dollar bottle of a four-year-old pinot noir – cheaper and younger than the wine her fancy-pants brother normally drank, she was sure, but she didn't care. By the time she came into the living room carrying two glasses and a bottle of wine, Porter said, 'I've got a plan.'

He was sitting on the floor in front of the coffee table, doing calculations on his phone. He held up the calculator for her to see as she started to pierce the bottle top with a corkscrew only to realize it was a screw top. Porter handed her his phone and took the bottle from her, opened it and poured them each a glass while she looked at the number on his calculator screen. 'Eight hundred and seventy-three thousand, six hundred?' she read aloud.

'Yep, and that's before overtime and holiday pay. Cheers,' he said, tipping his glass toward her.

'Cheers,' she said, picking up her glass and clinking it against his. They both took a sip, and then Lisa continued, 'What is this?'

'Your invoice, Leese.'

'What are you talking about, Porter, what invoice?'

'You say you've been providing childcare and housekeeping services for twelve years, yes?'

'Yes, but –'

'So you're a live-in nanny slash housekeeper, yes?'

'Well, I –'

'So room and board is included, not deducted. So he owes you the one-fifty a week rent you've been paying him, and one-fifty a week for twelve years is ninety-three thousand, six hundred dollars. And, I just googled it, and the average wage for a live-in nanny slash housekeeper is thirty-five dollars an hour. That's two hundred and eighty dollars per eight-hour day – I'm sure you do much more than that, too. Anyway, that's fourteen hundred a week, times fifty-two weeks in a year, which is seventy-two thousand, eight hundred dollars, times twelve fucking years, Lisa, which is eight hundred and seventy-three thousand, six hundred American smackaroos. But you'll have to pay taxes, obvs.'

'So, you're saying that I –'

'I'm saying that you give that goddamn wood-fucking right-wing piece of toxic masculinity a fucking *bill*, Lisa. He can either cut you a

check, or sign over this house to you, whichever you prefer.'

It was then that Lisa remembered that her twin brother was a very successful financial manager and that her sister-in-law was a very successful lawyer. She smiled. Porter smiled wider. She laughed. Porter laughed louder. She cried, and Porter wrapped his arms around her. 'It's not too late for your life, Lisa,' he said.

And she believed him.

By the time Eric walked in, Lisa and Porter were two bottles deep, and when they'd seen headlights through the curtain, they had thought he was the pizza delivery guy, so they both looked even more disappointed to see him than they would have otherwise been – which would have been a lot.

It was only when she saw Eric that Lisa realized that Jenny still had not come home. She was about to ask Eric where she was when Eric spoke first.

'Um, hello, Porter,' he said, ever the faux gentleman, always wanting to be liked by other men. 'I didn't know you were in town.' He held out his hand in greeting.

Porter remained seated on the couch and offered a terse, 'Hi, Eric.'

Eric didn't seem to know what to do with his unshaken hand, so he brought his palms together in an awkward prayer position and made a weird little bow. Lisa and Porter both laughed out loud.

'Namaste, dickhead,' Porter said under his breath, and Lisa cracked up again.

'What was that?' Eric asked.

'Oh, nothing,' Porter said.

Lisa was about to offer Eric a glass of wine – she couldn't help herself – when she realized that something was wrong. Eric seemed dazed; his mouth was open and he kept shaking his head.

'She's not here,' he said, a statement, not a question.

'Um, *no*,' Lisa confirmed. 'Didn't she meet you at Louey's?'

Eric shook his head. 'She never showed up. My truck's gone, though – I think she took it.'

'What? How? Have you called her?' Lisa noted the time, and saw

that it had been hours since Eric had dropped her off so he could go meet Jenny. ‘What have you been doing this whole time?’

‘Waiting,’ he said, exasperatedly. She didn’t ask him how he’d got home. She assumed it had been Cheryl.

She was about to say something when she heard the ping of a text on her phone. She read it silently, shaking her head, and then relayed the message to Eric and Porter. ‘It’s Kimber’s mom,’ she told them, ‘asking if we would remind her to wear her mouthguard when the girls go to bed tonight.’ After that, the alibis unravelled quickly, and within minutes six sets of parents were wondering where their kid was.

Chapter Twenty-Three

'Is it even legal for you to fly?' Tariq asked desperately, standing in the doorway of their bedroom as Brynn stuffed clothes into an open suitcase on their bed while Jillian placated the *Vogue* team in the living room.

'Yes, Tariq, I can fly up to thirty-six weeks. I'm thirty-two.'

He stared at her. He couldn't think of anything more to say. They'd been arguing for over an hour, ever since Brynn had erupted into panic and said that she needed to go *home*. She'd used that word. She needed to leave, she said – immediately – to go to America and search for her missing daughter, while she was almost eight months pregnant with *his* daughter. And that's when Tariq knew that he wouldn't be able to stop her, but he had to try.

'This is all my fault,' Brynn had said as soon as she'd hung up with Eric. 'I shouldn't have told her about Sabine, or not in the way I did. I shouldn't have contacted her. You were right, how you were feeling, but it's too late.'

'Okay,' Tariq had said slowly, trying to buy some time. 'I understand you're worried, Brynn, but do you really think you need to go there? What are you wanting to *do*?'

Brynn looked at him like he was insane. 'She's my *daughter*, Tariq, and she's *missing*. And it's *my* fault. I *need* to go look for her.'

'Okay, but Brynn, she's only been gone for two days.' He held his hands up like she was holding a loaded weapon – which, in a sense, she was. 'She's a teenager. She's probably fine, she's just acting out. She'll probably be home by the time you get there! And then what?' Tariq sensed the hypocrisy of his words as he spoke them. Sabine wasn't even born yet, but he already knew that if there was ever a time – God forbid – where Sabine was missing for more than a few hours, let alone a few days, that he would be losing his mind. He changed

tack. ‘I understand you’re worried, Brynn. Can we just make a plan together?’

But Brynn ignored him, muttering to herself.

‘Brynn, please just stop and think for a minute. What exactly is your plan? You’re going to fly to America and, what, start looking for her? Where will you look? Who would you call? What could you possibly do that Eric and Lisa aren’t doing now?’

Brynn shook her head, blowing off his questions, and started rifling through her drawers, pulling things off hangers, stuffing them into her suitcase.

‘Brynn, have you considered you could be making things worse? You just said you feel like this is all your fault. How is going there now going to make things better?’

‘Have you seen my toiletry bag?’ she asked him distractedly.

‘Brynn!’

‘Tariq!’ Brynn yelled. ‘Jenny is missing! She could be dead!’

‘But didn’t Eric say a bunch of her friends are missing too? They’re probably just –’

‘They could all be dead! Or kidnapped! Or trapped somewhere!’ she shouted.

‘Bry–’

‘Listen, Tariq,’ she said, trying to compose herself, ‘I don’t have a plan. Okay? I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I can’t do *nothing*. I’m her mom. If I get there and she’s okay – well, then, thank God! Hopefully she’ll want to see me. Maybe we can try to have her in our life. If not, well, I’ll see my parents and I’ll come straight back. I’m not *leaving* you, Tariq. I’m *going* to her.’

They’d had other versions of this conversation, arguing, begging, ignoring, yelling, crying, right up until Brynn got into an Uber and left for Charles de Gaulle airport.

It was too late to catch the same flight as Brynn, and even if he could have, Tariq wasn’t sure that was a good idea. Even though she hadn’t said it out loud, he knew that she didn’t want him to come, but what

choice did she leave him? After she'd left, he packed a small suitcase – willing it to be a short trip. He had hours yet before he needed to get to the airport for the red-eye from Paris to Detroit. He knew he should try to get some sleep, but he had too much adrenaline pumping through his body.

He poured himself a cognac, the same brand his dad used to drink – Remy Martin XO – and stood in the doorway of the room they were preparing for Sabine. Tariq felt like he was standing at the entrance of a portal into everything that was good and pure and right. Aveline Müller had outdone herself. She and her team had created a woodland fairy-tale dream room. The crib was an oval placed directly in the middle of the room, its rails and legs painted to look like bark, with root-like features spreading into the lush, green carpet. One corner of the room comprised a sculpture of a tree, made to look as though it were growing out of the wall, its branches protruding along the ceiling with hand-sewn felt leaves, its trunk soft to the touch, and stuffed animals – birds, squirrels, raccoons and foxes – perched here and there. The ceiling was a Botticelli sunset; soft, glowing peach and lemon hues swirling through an eggshell-blue sky. The changing table, a chest of drawers, and a rocking chair were all painted to look like they were hewn by elves in some medieval castle, and Aveline had strung felted vines entwined with the tiniest of fairy lights through every available rail. The entire room was a patch of comfort.

Tariq sat down in the rocking chair and thought about his wife, and the nature of the love he had for her. He knew it was love. He had a million small, precious memories of love quietly, tenderly, passing between them. He had watched her surreptitiously, while she did something mundane – arranging flowers in a vase, filing a nail – and felt himself well up with love. He knew, betrayed by the corner of his own eye, that she had done the same with him. But how durable was love? How much could it stretch and bend and withstand? And what of the collision of two kinds of love: a mother's love for her child, and a woman's love for her man . . . which love would win? Tariq knew the answer, even as he held out hope that Brynn would not have to choose, even as he promised himself he would do all he could not to ask her to choose, to make the pathway home – to him, *with* him, to this room – easy.

Chapter Twenty-Four

It was early in the afternoon of the fourth day of Jenny's absence. The parents of the six missing kids had started a group text, but the activity had petered out; nobody had any new ideas or information. The police had visited them all, and the nightly news had even run a segment asking for anyone who might have seen the teenagers to please call the police. Jenny's school portrait – alongside the others' – haunted Eric from the news on the television. His license plate number and the make and model of his truck flashed across the bottom of the screen. Nobody said it, but Eric was sure the other parents were blaming him – after all, none of *their* vehicles were missing. Lucas' car had been found in the Louey's employee parking lot, so it seemed as if it was his daughter who had spirited them all away.

Lisa and Eric sat at the kitchen table, stricken. A delicate, unspoken truce had been called between them; they would resume their battle when Jenny was home safe. They were racking their brains for anything they might have missed, any clue as to her whereabouts.

The detective who'd been assigned to the case, an unsmiling woman named Louise Johnson, had eyed him suspiciously as Eric and Lisa recounted the events that had led up to Jenny's disappearance for what felt like the hundredth time. She had been confused about Lisa – who was not Jenny's mother, not Eric's wife. And when, trying to lay it all out for her, he'd gone all the way back to Brynn's fall down the stairs, the steeliness in her gaze only grew harder as she scribbled on her notepad. He saw himself through her disapproving eyes; a man who had already gotten rid of his first wife under strange circumstances and had recently been caught with his secret lover by his daughter, who was now missing. By the time Detective Johnson left, Eric was suicidal with remorse.

He had determined, calmly and unequivocally, that he would kill

himself if Jenny didn't make it back safe and unharmed. How could he have let her out of his sight? How could he have placed so much distance between them that he literally had no idea where she might go, what she might do? Why hadn't he sat her down and told her about Brynn's pregnancy and been the one to help her process that information? How could he have allowed her to find him in the truck with Cheryl? *You're a fucking coward*, he told himself.

Eric knew better than to mention that Mary was gone, too. Racing into Louey's to meet Jenny, he'd left Mary in the truck. Jenny was at the pit of his stomach, at the center of his heart and the front of his mind – but the riptide of Mary's absence ran beneath it all. He had not been without her for nearly twelve years. It was, if he thought about it, his longest intimate relationship.

'Eric,' Lisa said softly from across the table, 'breathe.'

Eric realized he'd been holding his breath, and he inhaled manically, raggedly, as though he'd just broken through the surface of the sea. He'd been forgetting to breathe since Jenny disappeared.

'She'll come home,' Lisa said, 'I know it.'

Eric searched Lisa's face for the source of her conviction, looking for something he could trust, and for a moment her serious, steely gaze made him believe her. 'Okay,' he said.

They sat in silence; they had become masters of sitting in silence over the last few days. The whistle of the kettle for the endless pots of tea that Lisa made was the only sound for hours on end. Porter was due any moment. He was picking up Chinese food and coming over to – Eric didn't quite know what – *be* with them, he guessed. He had called Brynn, on the off chance that she'd heard from Jenny, but she hadn't. Typical, he'd thought, that Brynn would pull the pin on a grenade, throw it, and then run away, not even looking over her shoulder at the blast she'd caused, la-de-fucking-da.

Henry and Dana had come over that morning, as they had every morning for the last three days. There was nothing that Eric and Lisa could tell them in person that they couldn't tell them over the phone, but Eric understood that their daily drive to the Matador Street house felt like an action, when there was nothing that they could do. They directed all their queries to him, ignoring Lisa completely, even as she placed hot cups of tea in their hands. But their dismissal didn't seem to

bother her like it used to. Lisa had changed since the day their world cracked open; he had sensed it from the moment he saw the banana bread and the broken clock on the kitchen floor, and after her declaration in his truck, he'd known it. Maybe she'd been changing for a long while before that.

Eric had the distinct feeling that Lisa and Jenny had both been undergoing some sort of metamorphosis, changing in deep, significant ways, and that Eric had somehow missed it all. He'd been so caught up with his own mission, his own sense of purpose – to fight for his country alongside Cheryl when the world collapsed, to fight for the survival of his brethren – that he'd stopped noticing Jenny, stopped delighting in her, stopped knowing her. When he wasn't at work or with Cheryl, he spent his time deep inside the bowels of the internet. Apart from the occasional whiskey with Frank Zwick, his entire social circle existed inside a miasma of ones and zeroes, behind aliases and avatars. Beyond Cheryl, the only people he felt he could be himself with were Stars_and_Stripes, Mich_Militia_1, Own_The_Libs, Reagan_4EVA, Confederate_Pride_96, Douglas, and NRA_Life. *These* were his friends. These were the people he drank beer with, albeit alone in his recliner on his iPad.

Monday morning, when Jenny had driven away from him after catching him with Cheryl, it had seemed like a blessing in disguise. The cat was out of the bag. He would tell Lisa and Jenny about Cheryl, he would lay down the law, he would take control. Lisa would move out, Cheryl would move in. He would finally start to educate Jenny about the realities of the world, train and prepare her, remove the scales from her eyes. Jenny and Cheryl could become friends, maybe Jenny would even come to see her as a mentor . . .

But when Jenny had said she needed to talk to him, it had been a trick.

When Lisa had said that she wasn't going to leave, he'd been too stunned to reply.

Things had not gone any better with Cheryl.

'I told Lisa to move out,' he'd told her that evening as she drove him home. He felt it best to omit Lisa's response from his recounting.

'Oh, yeah?' Cheryl said. 'Why?'

'*Why?*' Eric echoed. 'Because Jenny knows about us now, and so

does Lisa. Jenny's going to go off to college soon. I just figured you'd move in with me, we could be, you know, *out.*'

'*Babe*,' Cheryl said, and he knew by her tone that she was about to disappoint him, 'that's not our plan! It's not *time.*'

'What do you mean?' He knew what she meant, but he had changed his mind. He wanted – needed – Cheryl now. 'This is the best time!'

'I mean that I like things the way they are, Eric.'

'The way they are?'

'*Yes*. Look, what happened today, with your daughter catching us, that was embarrassing to me. I'm a grown woman, we shouldn't be hiding in your truck to make out.'

'I know! That's what I'm trying to say. Let's stop hiding and, you know, go public!'

'You're not hearing me. What I mean is that what happened today was a sign that our life together, our time together, should stay where it is, out at the cabin. That's where we love each other best, babe. That's where we make sense. *Here*,' she paused, looking for the right words, 'here we have all our responsibilities, our jobs – I mean, Eric, you're my frickin' *boss* – our parents, your kid, you know, the real world. You and I will *go public*, as we've always said, when the *time* comes.'

Eric was flummoxed by the way Cheryl had said *your kid* – so flatly, so disinterestedly, she may as well have said *your refrigerator*. But he pressed on disingenuously, 'When what time comes?'

'Eric,' she said, in a *come on* tone of voice.

'What?'

'When the *civil war* begins! When we are called to the *front lines*! When our other responsibilities don't matter anymore. That's when we'll be *together* together. I thought we agreed on this.' She was getting angry now. 'This is what we've always said! I never told you I wanted to live with you, or to, I dunno, be a part of your kid's life, take over from Lisa. I've been *fine* with Lisa! That's not me, Eric.'

That was three days ago now, and they hadn't spoken since. Eric wasn't really sure where they'd left things. Because he hadn't asked her, because he was a coward, a weak, pathetic coward who was failing his daughter.

‘Eric!’ Lisa said loudly, and slapped her palm down hard on the table in front of him. ‘Breathe!’

Again, he gasped in a breath. He looked at Lisa. ‘I think I’m going to die,’ he said. And he did. He didn’t feel that he could physically bear Jenny’s absence, the possibility of her being in danger. His heart felt like it might implode. His weakness made him angry – what were all those gym sessions for? Or the drills he and Cheryl practiced at the cabin – military crawls on their elbows and scurrying up trees – if he couldn’t even carry a *feeling*?

‘You’re not going to die.’

‘I’m a piece of shit,’ he said.

Lisa didn’t say anything. Instead, she got up to refill the kettle for the hundredth time that day. He had lost Lisa, too, he knew, just when he’d decided he didn’t want to lose her, couldn’t lose her, not if Cheryl didn’t want a real life with him, not while Jenny was missing. Maybe Cheryl wasn’t who he thought she was. Maybe she had a trapdoor inside of her after all – like Brynn. Maybe, like Brynn, she was a ticking time bomb about to explode his life into a million pieces.

That morning, when Lisa had been so defiant, so forthright – *You can move out if you want to. I’m not leaving* – she’d shocked him. She had always been so passive, so malleable, so constantly available and acquiescent. Submissive, even. Obedient. Compliant. The characteristics the pastor at Elderpool Evangelical lauded in a wife, the qualities Gabby Zwick had. *My garden is there*, she’d said, as if the seeds she’d planted in the backyard bound her to the house. Maybe they did. Lisa, after all, tended not only to the garden, but to him, to Jenny, to the house. And wasn’t she attractive now? She was so different from the Auntie Lisa she’d been before Brynn left. Fitter, healthier, her hair had grown long, she’d stopped wearing so much makeup. Had his traditional American housewife been under his nose the whole time? Had he loved her, but just not known it?

Now, all he wanted was his daughter’s return, for the world to rewind to before Brynn had dropped a bomb on Jenny with her selfish news and set all of this into motion. Back to when he and Lisa and Jenny had had their reliable routine, their small comforts. Lisa’s tuna casserole Mondays and meatloaf Wednesdays and the familiar sight of the back of Jenny’s head watching *American Idol*. The casual

comments they exchanged, *Can you get me a glass of water?* and *Turn out the lights before you go to bed*, the language of their shared home. He longed for it. And suddenly, like defibrillator pads shooting life-saving voltage through his chest, like a spotlight shining in his eyes, like the punch in the face he knew he deserved, he realized that his life had not been shitty or rotten at all. There was no enemy at the gates. No *other* was trying to claim what was his. Nobody was stealing his win or pinning him down. Nobody had come to take anything away from him. He'd lost it all on his own.

'Eric, goddammit!' Lisa yelled for the third time. 'Breathe!'

The doorbell rang, and Eric and Lisa both jumped in their chairs. Believing it was Porter with the fried rice and sweet and sour pork that, invariably, Eric and Lisa would be too anxious to eat, Lisa said, 'I'll get it,' and headed for the front door.

Moments later, Lisa announced in a chipper voice dripping in sarcasm, 'Eric, your girlfriend's here!'

What? Nervously, Eric stood up from the kitchen table and joined Lisa at the front door where Cheryl stood, stone-faced.

'Um, what are you doing here?' Eric asked, skittishly looking from one woman to the other.

'Um, hello to you, too?'

Eric didn't know what to say. He was still trying to process the fact that Cheryl, in all her tall, tanned, blonde glory, wearing a floor-length white coat, which made her look like some kind of Nordic snow queen, was standing at his front door for the first time in the five years he'd known her. He looked at Lisa, who had a wry smile on her face as she opened the door wider and said, 'Cup of tea?'

Cheryl stepped across the threshold into the home he shared with Lisa and Jenny. And now, apparently, they were going to drink tea. More fucking tea.

Lisa led the way back to the kitchen, and as Cheryl passed Eric she leaned in to kiss him. Surprised, he leaned away from her and she said, 'Oh, *okay*,' and followed Lisa to the kitchen. Lisa refilled the kettle and set it boil, and then joined Eric and Cheryl at the kitchen table.

‘I saw the news, Eric,’ Cheryl began. ‘Were you going to tell me Janelle was still missing?’

‘Jennifer,’ Eric and Lisa said in stoic unison.

‘Right, sorry, Jennifer,’ Cheryl continued, unembarrassed by her mistake. ‘Anyways, I saw the news an hour ago, and something told me to check the cams. You need to look, now.’

‘The cams?’ Lisa asked.

Cheryl looked at Eric and bit her lip and then mouthed the word *sorry*. She did not look remotely sorry. Lisa watched Eric pull up an app on his iPad, which showed the footage of the twelve different security cameras constantly rolling on the Dogwood cabin. He tapped the square for the camera attached to the roof of the front porch, and in the grainy black and white image, he saw that his truck was parked in the driveway, alongside about six other vehicles.

‘What the fuck?’ he said, tapping the camera that watched over the living room. He saw people milling about, and someone was standing on the table, waving their arms around. Was that Lucas? No. Trent, maybe?

‘What the fuck?’ he said again, tapping the camera for the kitchen, and there she was: Jenny.

Alive.

Safe.

Thank God.

Oh, thank you thank you thank you God, Eric thought. His eyes watered with relief. He looked at Lisa. ‘She’s okay,’ he said quietly, and saw the wave of relief pass through her as it had him. He looked back at the screen, and his relief turned to disbelieving anger as he saw Jenny, Lucas, and some other kids he recognized standing around the kitchen bench. He watched as Lucas moved a bottle across a row of shot glasses, then they all picked them up and held them aloft before knocking them back.

‘Jesus Christ, Jenny,’ he said.

‘There’s more of ’em,’ Cheryl said, as if she were talking about cockroaches or rats. ‘They’re *everywhere.*’

Eric’s eyes widened as he tapped on the camera for the bunker. At least ten, maybe fifteen teenagers, none of whom he recognized, were roaming the aisles, pulling things from shelves, throwing things at

each other, and one of them was trying to pry open the locked weapons box. A wave of intense rage swept through Eric. He threw his iPad down on the table.

'Um,' Lisa said, 'would anyone care to fill me in on where exactly Jenny is?'

'The cabin,' Eric and Cheryl said in unison, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

'Oh, yes of course, the *cabin*,' Lisa said, 'and where the *fuck* is the cabin?'

'Dogwood,' Eric said absently, and then, '*but how could* –' and before he finished his sentence, he was up and hurrying along the hall, pulling open the top drawer of his dresser, opening the wooden box, and staring at the empty space where the spare set of keys should have been. He stood there, gawping, holding the box in his hand for the longest minute of his life, trying to imagine his daughter in his room, opening this drawer, taking the keys. And not just the keys, he remembered, but also a map and the security code to the bunker. As pieces began to fall into place, he felt his legs go weak. He had to go get her, immediately.

He rushed back to the kitchen where Lisa and Cheryl were already on their feet.

'We need to go now,' Eric said.

'Should we call the police?' Lisa asked, turning off the burner under the kettle. 'Or the other parents?'

'No!' Eric and Cheryl shouted.

'Um, okay then,' Lisa said, 'I'll drive.'

'I'm coming too,' Cheryl declared.

It was at this point that Porter walked into the kitchen. In one hand, he held a big brown bag that filled the room with the aroma of MSG. In the other, he held a manila envelope. Eric could make out the word *INVOICE* written across it in blue Sharpie. Porter looked at Lisa, who, again in her overly chipper tone, said, 'Porter! Meet the girlfriend, Charmaine!'

'*Cheryl*,' Cheryl said.

'Oh, sorry, is it?' Lisa said, her eyes still on Porter. 'We're all going to the *cabin* to get Jenny! Road trip?'

'Oh!' Porter said, and handed Lisa the envelope. Eric saw just how

similar his smile was to Lisa's when he turned to Cheryl and said, 'Delighted to meet you, Charmaine! Off to the *cabin* now, are we?' Lisa stuffed the envelope into her purse.

Eric felt as if he were in a nightmare where the walls kept closing in around him and he couldn't make a sound, where everyone was laughing while his lungs refused to work.

'Oh, Jesus Christ, Eric,' Lisa said, '*Breathe.* She's alive. We're going to get her. Better we all go – clearly there's a party to shut down. And it seems like there's, what, a secret torture dungeon or something that your girlfriend needs to check on? And Porter is coming because I want him to. Let's go.'

Eric – his face drained of color; and Cheryl – her eyes narrow and suspicious; and Porter – looking positively enthused, all followed Lisa's orders. The four of them maneuvered around each other in the small foyer, trying to pull on their boots and zip up their coats without elbowing anyone in the face. When they were ready, Lisa grabbed the keys to her minivan off the hook and opened the front door.

And there was Brynn.

Part Five

Chapter Twenty-Five

Brynn had wandered around the terminal of Charles de Gaulle airport, trying to pretend that this was just like any other trip, and not, perhaps, a monumental mistake – or, maybe, the absolute best and right thing. Could it be both? Pulling her carry-on roller bag behind her, she meandered through the everything-shop. She bought some mindless gossip magazines, *Voici* and *Tatler*, a bottle of water, and some breath mints. She walked slowly past the window displays of various duty-free shops, browsed a MAC store and bought a lipstick, a matte peach called *Honeylove* – even though she was contractually obligated to exclusively use La Belle Visage products. She went to the bathroom. She was recognized, twice, by women around her age, and smiled for selfies with both of them while suffering their unbidden pregnancy advice. And then, when it was twenty minutes until boarding, she went to sit down in one of the uncomfortable blue seats at gate 4A.

She checked her phone, but there was nothing from Tariq. She knew he was angry with her, but she took his silence as – not empathy, per se – but as a kind of reluctant mercy. He knew she needed to do this, and while he wasn't going to send her off with confetti and flowers, he wasn't going to stand in her way, either. There was no update from Eric, though she wasn't sure that Eric would tell her if there had been any news. If Eric told her that Jenny was home safe, would she still board her plane? She told herself that no, of course she wouldn't, that she was only going back to Elderpool to search for Jenny. If Jenny was no longer missing, she would go home to Tariq. But then why hadn't she messaged her parents that she was coming? Or Eric, for that matter? She knew, even as she tried to dismiss the thought, that she didn't want to be told not to come, didn't want to be told that she wasn't needed.

She imagined all of them – Eric, Jenny, Lisa, her parents – berating

her with a chorus of remonstration. *Why would we need you? What could we possibly need from you?* She didn't have an answer, and so instead she was choosing to appear in their lives out of thin air, just as she'd disappeared out of it before.

The woman at the check-in desk turned on her little microphone and made an announcement. The flight was canceled. Something wrong with the plane. As many passengers as they could accommodate would be rebooked for the next flight, on a different plane, in four hours. Any passengers willing to rebook for tomorrow were to come forward and receive a credit for one hundred fifty euro. '*Merde*,' Brynn said, and did the math. The next flight would get her to Detroit much later in the afternoon than she'd hoped, around two pm, and then she'd have to rent a car and drive two hours to Elderpool. Factor in the bathroom stops, which she knew she'd need, and she'd be pulling up to the Matador Street house around five-thirty, give or take. It would already be starting to get dark by then, she knew. For some reason, she had wanted to arrive before the sun started to set. She had the sense that the sun – even a weak, distant October one – would soften the blow of her arrival.

By the time Brynn had stood in line, rebooked, found a restaurant to sit in while she ate a croque monsieur and read one of her magazines, peed three times, and made her way to the new gate, which was in a different terminal and required a short ride on a tram, she was exhausted.

The fact that she couldn't find a comfortable position for her body in the rigid plastic chair was the only reason she didn't fall asleep then and there, allowing the face of La Belle Visage to nod off onto a stranger's shoulder, drooling inelegantly. Instead, she stared straight ahead through the large windows, watching planes take off and land, their lights blinking in the black night.

A song came on the terminal speakers, high and plaintive. Brynn recognized it instantly: Joni Mitchell's 'Big Yellow Taxi'. She recalled what Jillian had tried so hard to convey to her at breakfast just two mornings ago: telling her about Joni Mitchell's story to explain that

she didn't need to justify herself or the choices she'd made when she left Jenny behind. But Joni Mitchell was Joni *fucking* Mitchell. Brynn knew that she'd done nothing so transcendent with her freedom from Jenny. She hadn't created anything – well, except for Sabine. Did that count?

The song ended and another one began, a new French pop song Brynn didn't know. Brynn squeezed her eyes shut and exhaled through her nose, willing her train of thought away from questions she didn't know the answer to.

When the attendant announced that anyone requiring special assistance could begin boarding, she got in line and hoped her pregnant belly and the shadows under her eyes would count. They did, and she was one of the first on the plane, and therefore snug in her window seat, sleeping mask on, earplugs in, and already falling asleep – lulled by the deep, rumbling hum of the engines – by the time Tariq walked past her and took his seat near the back of the plane.

And even later, when she walked right past his sleeping form to the lavatory, she didn't notice him. She did not notice him while she was deplaning, she didn't see him in line behind her at customs, nor did she see him at the baggage claim or in line at the Avis rental car desk. He was, of course, going out of his way to stay out of her eyeline, while at the same time keeping her in his sights.

Brynn's fist was raised in the air, about to knock on the door when it opened. Eric, Lisa, Porter and a woman in a white coat stared at her. Lisa extended her index finger and touched Brynn lightly on the shoulder.

'I'm real,' Brynn said, 'it's me. I've come to help search for Jenny.' Nobody moved. Brynn wondered if her accent was too thick for them to understand, so she tried her best to enunciate clearly when she added, 'I should have called, but I figured you would have told me not to come, and, well, I needed to come.'

Still they stared at her. Brynn placed her hands protectively over her belly, and shifted her purse from her right shoulder to her left. They stared at her as if these were the most fascinating movements

they'd ever seen a human being execute.

'Um,' Brynn said, but before she could say another word, all four of them spoke at once.

'She's safe, Brynn, we're going to get her now,' Eric said.

'Who *are* you?' asked the woman in the white coat.

'Well *ooh la la* and *bonjour* very much!' Porter said, grinning.

'Road trip!' Lisa said, but she was crying and wrapping her arms around Brynn.

Lisa offered to give Brynn the short version while they all piled into the minivan and put their seatbelts on. 'Charmaine is Eric's secret girlfriend. Eric and Charmaine have a secret cabin in Dogwood. Seems that Jenny stole the keys and is throwing a party at the secret cabin. So, you're caught up.' Brynn didn't feel remotely caught up. If anything, she had more questions now than she'd arrived with. But they knew where Jenny was, that was the important thing. And they were on their way to see her now.

Brynn was sitting in the front seat, given her delicate condition, and was struggling to get the seatbelt across her belly. Lisa was connecting her iPhone to the minivan's Bluetooth and securing it into the phone holder. 'What's the address for my GPS?' she asked over her shoulder.

'It's not that kind of place,' Eric said. 'Just head toward Dogwood and I'll direct you.'

'Oh, *exciting*,' Porter said.

'Well, alright then, away we go,' Lisa said, releasing the parking brake and turning on her headlights. She was just about to pull out of the driveway when a man's dark face appeared at Brynn's passenger window. Eric and the woman in the white coat – Charmaine? – both shrieked.

'Tariq?' Brynn whispered incredulously as she lowered the window, and then louder, and in French she said, 'Tariq? What are you –' Her stomach did a little flip and she couldn't discern whether it was relief, panic, or another Braxton Hicks contraction.

'I had to come, Brynn, I had no choice,' said Tariq.

‘But how did you . . .?’

‘I followed you.’

‘But how?’

‘We ended up on the same plane, actually. You didn’t see me.’

‘*What?* Um, okay. We’re just, I have to –’

‘I’m coming with you. Are you going to introduce me?’

The blank faces of the others told Brynn that they had understood very little of the conversation.

‘Everyone,’ Brynn addressed the occupants of the minivan, ‘this is my husband, Tariq. He, um, well, he has also arrived, um, to, here.’

‘Tariq!’ Lisa leaned across Brynn’s belly so Tariq could see her face. ‘I’m Lisa. Hop in, buddy.’

Tariq slid open the door to the back of the van where Eric and Charmaine – in the first row of seats – continued to glare at him, and Porter – in the back – looked as if someone had just given him a winning lottery ticket. Porter patted the seat next to him and said, ‘Welcome to America. We’re going to break up a party in the woods. Did you bring your AK-47?’

‘Um, no, I apologize,’ Tariq said in his flawless English with a touch of a British accent, crouching to make his way to the seat next to Porter. ‘They wouldn’t allow it past customs.’

Porter laughed and punched him good-naturedly on the shoulder. ‘We’re going to get along great!’ he said.

Now, Brynn was in a van with Lisa, Eric, Eric’s girlfriend, Porter and Tariq, on their way to what Lisa had explained was Eric’s secret cabin. Nobody was speaking. Brynn thought that Eric, his head in his hands, might be crying. Charmaine was on her phone, furiously texting. Porter and Tariq were both staring out the windows, and Lisa – who kept stealing glances at Brynn – was concentrating on the road. Lisa, who had hugged her at the front door, who was being so kind, who seemed genuinely happy to see her, looked so different from the last time Brynn had seen her. She looked strong and healthy. Her long brown hair reminded Brynn of a horse’s mane, falling around her shoulders in thick glossy strands. Even her hands looked strong – their

ropy tendons wrapped around the steering wheel. Brynn could see dirt under her fingernails. Gone was the extra weight that Lisa had always tried to cover with a sweater tied around her waist; gone was the nervous blinking, the tremulous voice, and the thick layer of makeup. Was this what parenting Jenny had done to Lisa? Pared her back to her essential self, which was, Brynn thought, beautiful? Had being a mother transformed Lisa into a capable, forthright woman, or was this the result of Eric's love? Had he loved her into this new, better Lisa? But that didn't seem right, because who was Charmaine? And why was Porter here? Brynn wanted to ask Lisa about this, and so many other things, but not with an audience. Instead, she spoke to Tariq in fast, slangy French – hoping to make it even more impenetrable to the other ears in the van.

'What are you doing here?' She craned her head around to look at him. She could just make out his face in the shadows of the back seat. Eric and Charmaine looked up at her briefly, and then went back to their sulking and texting, respectively. She was, she discovered, happy that Tariq had materialized. She had the sense that she needed backup. But it also made her feel juvenile and cornered – perhaps he hadn't understood her need to come here after all.

'This isn't the time,' he responded. 'We'll talk later.'

'This is the *only* time, Tariq,' she said. 'When we get to this cabin, Jenny will be there, and I don't know how she will react to me, and that is my focus, that's why I'm here. I can't be worried about *you*. Why did you come?'

'Brynn, why did *you* come?'

'We've been through this, Tariq! I had no choice, I'm her –'

'Her mother, yes, I know,' he interrupted, 'and I'm *her* father.'

Brynn winced, and placed her hand over her navel.

'So, I had no choice, either,' he added.

'You don't trust me,' she said, a statement not a question.

'Do you trust *yourself*?'

The question seared through her and Brynn realized she'd been, in her own way, asking herself this very question for weeks. Ever since she'd reached out to Jenny, ever since she'd decided that she wanted Jenny *and* Sabine, she'd been asking herself whether she was a force for good for the people she loved, or not. Whether she could have what

she wanted without hurting anyone. Soon she would look upon the face of her firstborn. And then . . . what? Said hello? Asked her how school was going? Offered to braid her hair? Begged for forgiveness? Made promises? Made sandwiches? Stayed? Left? She shuddered.

'I've made a terrible mistake,' she whispered.

'Which time?' Tariq asked gently, and she knew he was asking her if she meant leaving Jenny twelve years ago, or leaving him last night.

'Both,' she said.

'We can get through this, Brynn. I'm here for you, too, not just for Sabine, okay? We'll get through this, and then we'll go home. We don't even have to get out of the van when we get there. We can just let them go get her, take her back to Eric's place, and then go straight back to the airport, okay?' On hearing his name, Eric looked over his shoulder at Tariq, who put his hands up in the universal sign for *easy, man, no trouble here.*

'If you want to have Jenny in your life,' Tariq continued, 'I understand, and if she's open to it we can make a plan for all of us, I promise.'

'Maybe,' Brynn whispered, even as she knew she wouldn't be able to stay in the van. Even as she knew that she would stand before Jenny, no matter what the cost, no matter Jenny's reaction. She would offer herself. She had no choice. Sabine kicked her hard in the ribs.

They drove for the next thirty minutes in silence, and then Eric spoke up. 'Take the next right, down that dirt road,' he said, and then they were driving through thick, dense night forest, the stuff of horror movies. Brynn kept expecting a phantom girl in a tattered white dress to step out in front of them. She tried not to look for ghosts in the trees that flew past.

Fifteen minutes later, Eric said, 'Slow down.' Lisa complied, and soon after he said, 'Turn left there, at that tree with the orange fabric tied around it.' They turned onto an even narrower dirt road, and before long they were navigating through the long line of cars that had been parked along the road. As they got closer, their faces began to glow with a faint amber glaze. Lisa and Brynn looked at each other,

and then back at the passengers behind them.

A fire was burning at the end of the road.

A deep, penetrating bass reverberated through the trees.

They could smell the sweet smoke.

Lisa turned off the headlights and slowed to a crawl, and as the road emptied into what was usually a wide pine needle–strewn front yard, they saw a ring of teenage bodies around a massive bonfire, its flames darting and licking higher than their heads. Nobody noticed the six of them as they parked the van, got out, and made their way toward the fire. As they got nearer, they stopped in unison, their bodies one form, fused in horror, as they saw Jenny, standing on top of a chair, far too close to the fire, holding Eric's volute over her head.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Four days ago, after Jenny had navigated to the highway, Lucas studied the map and told her they had a while to go before their exit. All six of their bodies seemed to soften at once, letting go of the tension and adrenaline of their getaway and relaxing into this moment out of time they'd found themselves in. Adam yelled, 'Tunes!' and Lucas turned on the radio. A man's voice raged against transgender athletes competing in the Olympics. 'Ugh,' Jenny said, 'change it.' Lucas spun the dial until he found a hip-hop classics station, and they all nodded their heads as Eminem explained to them that they only had one shot, to not miss their chance.

As they drove, the kernel of an idea that had been rattling around inside of Jenny finally popped. It was so simple, she couldn't quite understand how nobody had explained it to her before. *Anyone, at any time*, she realized, *can make a choice to do something, and that choice will, invariably, make things happen*. All her life, people around her had been making choices, setting events into motion, changing the contours of her world without her input. Her whole life existed within the parameters of other people's decisions. She'd chosen nothing. Until today. Today, she decided, she was finished being on the receiving end of other people's choices. The notion felt deeply profound, and she wanted to share it with her friends, but couldn't think of a way to explain it without sounding cheesy, and without having to explain just how messed-up her family was, more than they already knew. So she stayed silent as she felt herself change.

They'd been on the road about twenty minutes when Kimber said, 'Um, guys? We don't have any alcohol, or anything.' The rest of them groaned.

'I could try my ID?' Yolanda offered. Her elder sister Maribel had bequeathed Yolanda her old driver's license as a parting gift when she

left for college. Yolanda had green eyes, Maribel blue. Yolanda was barely over five feet tall, Maribel was five foot eight. But, they both had beautiful crème-caramel skin, and thick, curly black shoulder-length hair. It was worth a shot, they decided, and Jenny took the next exit and pulled into a twenty-four-hour liquor emporium next to a different Louey's and a used car lot. 'Wish me luck,' Yolanda said as she jumped down from the truck, threw her shoulders back, and strode confidently into the liquor store, her wallet fat with the cash they'd all chipped in.

Nobody said a word until they saw her reemerge, running and hoisting herself onto a full shopping cart, riding it like a scooter to the truck. When they saw the cases of beer, the cheap boxes of wine, a bottle of Fireball whiskey and coconut rum, they whooped and cheered as if Yolanda had just kicked a goal. They loaded the car and got back on the road and talked shit about everything and nothing until Lucas, scrutinizing the map, said, 'Turn left here,' and they turned onto a long dirt road. The radio turned fuzzy as they lost reception, and Adam started singing 'Old Town Road' by Lil Nas X and they all joined in until Lucas yelled, 'The orange fabric!' – and Jenny screeched to a stop, kicking up a cloud of dirt. 'Turn here, it says,' instructed Lucas. Jenny reversed a few yards and then turned into what they realized was a very long driveway, eventually emerging into a cleared open space, in the center of which was a cabin.

Jenny parked the truck and they all jumped out and looked around, making sure there was nobody else there.

'What is this place?' Kimber asked, kicking up a spray of gravel.

'Honestly, I don't even know,' Jenny said. 'I found the keys and the map in my dad's room.'

'Why were you in his room?' Yolanda asked as they walked across the yard toward the cabin.

'Long story,' Jenny said, 'but I guess it was because I knew he was hiding something, and I think *this* is it.' She looked at the various keys in her hand, found the one that said *dogwood front door*, and led them up the stairs.

'Look, there's a lake,' Trent said, and they all turned and peered at the shimmering water through the trees.

'Cool,' Lucas said.

Jenny put the key in the lock, and even though she knew how keys and locks worked, she was nonetheless surprised when the door opened so easily. She expected it to put up a fight. They stood in a tight group in the living room, taking it in: the taxidermied deer heads, the plastic mounted bass that sang 'Don't Worry, Be Happy' that all their parents had bought years ago, thinking it was so funny. There was an old rifle mounted over the fireplace, well-worn brown leather couches, a coffee table with a stack of magazines that all had the words *American* or *Patriot* in their names.

'Fuck yeah,' Adam said, breaking the silence, and he, Lucas and Trent went back to the car to grab the booze. Jenny, Yolanda and Kimber splintered off to explore the rest of the cabin.

'Bedroom in here!' Yolanda called from behind the door at the far end of the living room.

'Bathroom!' Kimber yelled from down a little hallway between the lounge room and the kitchen where Jenny was, opening and closing cupboard doors. 'Kitchen!' she yelled, but Yolanda and Kimber were already walking in. Kimber opened the fridge. 'Um, creepy?' she said as she stepped aside to reveal that it was fully stocked. She pulled out a carton of milk and checked the date. 'It's good for another week,' she said. 'Are you sure nobody is living here?'

'Like I said,' Jenny reiterated, 'I really don't know. Maybe? But my dad's at work today. I know he's planning to go home tonight. So *tonight*, it's ours.'

The boys came in and unloaded the alcohol onto the kitchen island.

'Shots!' Yolanda yelled, and started opening cupboard doors until she found six water glasses. 'These will have to do.'

Lucas poured them each a shot of the Fireball whiskey. 'To Jenny's dad's secret cabin!' he yelled.

'To Jenny's dad's secret cabin!' they all echoed.

Jenny felt the sweet, cinnamon heat burn her esophagus. 'Woooo!'

'Is there wi-fi in here?' Kimber asked. 'There's no reception; just in case, you know.'

They all checked their phones. The option to join the network St0new@ll! popped up. Trent spotted a blinking modem on the floor, and went and read aloud the password on the back. They all logged in. 'Hey, can we invite some more people out here?' Adam asked. 'Just a

few, like, cool people.' Jenny nodded. She really didn't care if the whole school came. All she wanted was another shot of whiskey, which she was in the process of pouring for all of them. After they took their second shot, and after they'd all messaged more of their friends, sending them a picture of the map they'd smoothed out on the table, Jenny said, 'Hey, I think we should actually turn our phones off.'

'Ummmm,' said five people who had grown up with their phones.

'My dad is crazy with this stuff,' Jenny explained, 'like, I swear he'd be able to track my phone or something.'

The excitement of going off-grid, the buzz of the two shots of whiskey, and the anticipation that maybe they were on the cusp of what might be an epic party won over. So they sent off a volley of last-minute texts to all the cool people they knew, and then they all turned their phones off and put them in one of the kitchen drawers.

Then Yolanda opened a door off the side of the kitchen, expecting to find another bathroom or something, but instead she saw the grid of security screens mounted along the wall. 'Guys,' she said, 'come check this out.' Jenny followed the rest of her friends into the small room, and they all gazed at the images on the screens in front of them. In one, they saw her dad's truck parked where they'd left it. In another, they saw themselves in real time, watching the screens. They looked up and spotted the camera in the corner of the room.

'Say cheese!' Kimber said.

They all said cheese.

'Should we try to, like, turn these off?' Yolanda asked. They all looked at Jenny.

'Um, no?' Jenny ventured. 'Knowing my dad, if we fucked with them, he'd probably get an alert or something. Just leave 'em, I think.' They all nodded. It was as good an idea as any, and besides, none of them knew the first thing about dismantling security cameras. They were heading back out to the kitchen when Lucas stubbed his toe on something and looked down, 'Hey,' he said, shaking his foot and wincing, 'what the hell?' They peered down at the floor at what looked like a latch. Embedded beside it was a keypad with a little screen. '*What the actual?*' Adam said, and Jenny remembered what had been written on the bottom of the map she'd found. *Bunker*, followed by her birthday and a hashtag.

‘Bunker,’ she whispered, and kneeled down in front of the keypad. She entered 11408# and a red light on the screen turned green. ‘Try it,’ she said, and Lucas pulled on the latch, opening a trapdoor that revealed a staircase. They all reached for their phones to use the flashlight feature, and remembered they’d turned them off and left them in the kitchen. Lucas, already descending, found a switch along the wall and suddenly the stairs were flooded with fluorescent light, as bright as a hospital. The six of them continued down in silence. At the bottom of the stairs, they stared at the rows upon rows of full shelves. The group fanned out, exploring. Jenny took in the neatly organized stacks of canned food, the boxes of toilet paper and cartons of long-life milk.

‘There’s a bunch of bags of rice and dried beans over here,’ Kimber called from further down the aisle.

‘Batteries and flashlights and stuff,’ Adam added from the next aisle over.

Jenny caught up with Lucas and Trent, who were standing in front of a locked plexiglass box, staring at the many guns, boxes of ammunition and knives inside of it. ‘Dude,’ Trent said, ‘is that a fucking *crossbow*?’

‘Guys!’ Yolanda called from the far end of the room. ‘Come here!’

They all made their way to the end of the shelves, marveling at the items they passed along the way, until they found Yolanda standing in front of four sets of bunk beds, each with two bare mattresses, stacks of sheets and blankets on top of them – except for one, which had been made, and upon which they could still see the faint depressions of heads on the pillows. Jenny felt like one of the bears coming home to see the imprints from Goldilocks’ bed-hopping.

‘Fuck,’ Jenny said.

‘I’ve heard of this,’ Trent said. ‘I think your dad is a prepper.’

‘A what?’ asked Lucas.

‘A doomsday prepper,’ Kimber chimed in, ‘like, people who prepare for the end of the world and shit.’

‘Nuclear war, I think,’ Yolanda added.

‘Same thing, right?’ said Adam.

‘Jenny, you okay?’ Lucas asked, putting his arm around her shoulders.

‘I’m *so* okay,’ she said. ‘But this is fucking *nuts*,’ she continued, ‘so I guess we party like it’s the end of the world?’

‘It’s the end of the world!’ they yelled, their voices booming through the bunker.

Jenny went back upstairs to take another shot. She didn’t want to be down in the bunker, it only made her angry. All the food and supplies, the weapons and the beds, it might be amusing to her friends, but for Jenny it was confirmation of a suspicion she’d sensed but never really grasped before now: her dad wanted the world to end. You didn’t amass all this shit and not secretly hope to use it someday. He didn’t care about the life Jenny might want to create for herself, about her hopes and dreams. He wanted the end-times, the apocalypse, the locusts and the four horsemen and the plagues. Her loss would be his gain. The vice that had been slowly tightening around the remaining rock of her love for her dad ground harder, reducing what small amount was left to dust.

That first night, they made a fire in the fireplace and sat around the living room playing drinking games. Jenny made everyone spaghetti with the ingredients she found in the well-stocked kitchen. Yolanda spewed hers up after she lost a round of Don’t Laugh, unable to resist Kimber’s impression of their math teacher, Mr. Grimes, who had a very pronounced lisp. ‘*Clath*,’ Kimber said, ‘*thith ith an ithotholethe triangle!*’ Yolanda laughed as she ran to the toilet, laughed while she threw up, and came back for more. They all passed out on top of each other like a pack of wolves. And when they woke up the next morning, they were only slightly hungover.

The next morning, people began to arrive in waves, as if propelled by an invisible tide. People they knew, people they didn’t, mostly their age, some older. They all brought alcohol. Someone brought a keg. Not having any other option, Lucas, Adam and Trent raided the men’s

clothing from the bunker and spent the day in camouflage hunting jackets and neon orange beanies. They all wondered about their parents and the school they were missing and the trouble they were most certainly in, but all of those things felt too far away and somehow too unreal to consider. Or, at least, less real than the cabin, and each other, and the space they had around them. And because nobody had turned up at the cabin to get them, no Jenny's dad, no cops . . . and because they found that they enjoyed having their phones turned off and away from their bodies, that it made them feel freer and less observed than any of them could remember, they decided to stay for one more night.

The morning of the third day was unseasonably warm, and they had all decided that it was a sign they should stay. They were already in trouble, they figured, though they still refused to look at their phones and break the spell. What was one more night?

The picture of the map had circulated like wildfire through the circuitry of digital communications, via encrypted apps, and always with the message: *don't tell anyone else.* People kept arriving, everyone with more booze and weed, and some brought tents which they pitched around the property. Someone set up a Bluetooth speaker outside and was blasting music into the empty woods.

There was dancing and singing and moments of teenaged transcendence. There was a pulsing synchronicity between their many bodies as they leaped in unison – jumping to the beat of the music – as high as gravity would let them before the earth pulled them down, but still they leaped, again and again. Their hearts pounded and their lungs pumped, and for the first time in her life, Jenny finally felt the meaning of the word *holy*.

Lucas and Jenny had a passionate fight about whether it was ever okay to eat dogs. Jenny said that there was never an instance where it was

justified, *nev-er*. Lucas said that if you were starving and dying and aliens had invaded and there was literally nothing else around, you should be allowed to eat a dog.

Kimber and Yolanda huddled around Jenny while she cried and complained about Lucas.

Later that night, Lucas and Jenny had sex on what she guessed was the bed her dad and his new girlfriend slept on.

On the morning of the fourth day, a bunch of people left and there were only about twenty people remaining, the outer bands of their social circle, but close enough to party with. Jenny made pancakes for all of them and felt pride in her ability to feed her friends, to provide them with this venue which had snapped them all out of time, as if they'd slipped into an alternate universe.

After breakfast, a rusty brown Camaro rolled into the yard, and two guys climbed out, waving at Jenny and the rest of the crew who were sitting around on the front porch.

'Liam!' Adam yelled, jumping up and racing toward the two newcomers. 'Noah!' He embraced them both and turned back toward the porch and said, 'These are my cousins, they're the fucking greatest!'

Liam and Noah, it turned out, were Adam's older cousins who had both come back to Elderpool after deciding to drop out of college and 'join the real world', as Noah explained it. Noah's story was that he'd gotten a football scholarship to Michigan State, but when he snapped a ligament in his knee and was told it would never heal properly, the prospect of a purely academic college experience was enough to send him packing. Liam, Noah's older brother, who had also been at Michigan State, dropped out for hazier reasons, something to do with what he described as 'incongruous worldviews'. It was enough to make the seventeen-year-old seniors at Elderpool High look at him like he was a god.

Noah, sitting against the porch railing between two girls Jenny recognized from chemistry class, announced, 'You guys do know

you're, like, officially *missing*, right? You're on television and shit.'

'What?' the original six said in unison. Noah and Liam went on to explain that, yeah, their pictures were on the news, the cops had offered a reward for any information, but that apparently it had become a badge of honor among those who had been texted a photo of the map to not turn them in. 'It's been like a little secret society – nobody wants you guys to get caught. Everyone wants you to, like, win,' Liam explained. 'Turning you in would be like a crime against humanity.'

'Uh, it's not like we're on the run or anything,' Jenny interjected. 'This is my dad's place.'

'Well, he doesn't know you're here, though, does he? All your parents think you're missing. Which, technically speaking, you are.'

Jenny, Lucas, Kimber, Trent, Yolanda and Adam all felt a stab of guilt, and a magnetic pull toward their dormant phones. Perhaps it was time to go home, they were all thinking. They'd had a good run, they'd somehow managed to throw a four-day party that apparently – according to Noah and Liam – was going down in party history. But before any of them could voice their shared conclusion, Liam reached into his pocket and pulled out a small plastic bag of multicolored tablets which Jenny fleetingly thought were the Flintstones vitamins she used to take when she was a kid.

'Molly?' he asked, as he poured the pills into the palm of his hand.

'Fuck yeah,' Adam said, and Trent and Lucas and some of the others on the porch murmured their assent. Yolanda, Jenny and Kimber looked at each other. They knew what Molly was, but none of them had ever tried it. They gave each other a *should we?* look, and Jenny realized her friends were both looking at her to decide.

They were officially *missing*, Jenny thought with a measure of astonishment. Her actions *had* indeed made things happen. This was likely their final day at the cabin; it was only a matter of time before one of the teenage partygoers broke and told their parents that they'd seen the kids from TV. So why not step right up to the line? Why not get everything they could out of this time together? When they did eventually go home, they'd all be in a lot of trouble, without a doubt, but the trouble wouldn't last. Soon they'd be back in their routines with the usual due dates and exams and practices and applications. And then in the blink of an eye they'd graduate, and if Jenny could

pull off her plan, if she could figure out what the fuck the Spirit of Our Times was, she'd be leaving them all for California. She looked at Kimber and Yolanda, at Lucas and Adam and Trent. She loved them, she knew, but their time together wouldn't last forever. This, right now, was their bubble of shared time, before adulthood popped it and jettisoned them from each other. The looks on their faces told her they felt it too; the air around them crackled with the frisson of deliberate recklessness, the innate need to rage against the brevity of youth. She smiled and nodded at the girls, and said, with a theatrical formality that made Kimber and Yolanda chuckle, 'Yes please, sir, we would love some of your Molly.'

When Liam held his palm out in front of the trio, Yolanda chose a green one imprinted with a smiley face, Kimber chose an orange one with a palm tree, and Jenny chose pink with a love heart.

'Does your jaw feel weird?' Jenny asked Yolanda and Kimber.

'Yes,' they both said, moving their jaws from side to side.

'Do you feel all tingly?' Jenny asked them.

'Yes,' they both said, and the three girls waved their fingers at each other, letting their fingertips touch, like they were casting a spell.

'I'm hot,' Yolanda said, even though they were outside, still on the porch, with the sun swiftly setting and the air cold enough for them to see their own breath as they exhaled, which they stared at in awe.

'Are we dragons?' Kimber asked, exhaling powerfully and passing her hand through her vaporized breath.

Yolanda took off her shoes and socks and said, 'Let's put our feet on the ground.' This seemed like an excellent idea, so Kimber and Jenny also removed their shoes and socks and followed Yolanda down the stairs to the yard where they formed into a little circle and held hands while they grasped at pine needles with their toes.

'I loooove your toenail polish, Yol,' Kimber said, and they all stared at Yolanda's brightly painted toes – electric blue – for what seemed like an eternity.

'I love you guys so much,' Kimber said.

‘Awww, we love you too!’ Jenny said as they wound their arms around each other like vines, knotting themselves into an embrace. Seconds later, some other girls from school were elbowing their way into the hug, smelling each other’s hair, complimenting each other’s butts, marveling at the color of each other’s eyes. And then they were lying on their backs on the hard ground, impervious to the cold, delighting in the sensation of the earth holding them up, presenting them like offerings to the darkening sky.

‘I smell smoke,’ Kimber said, and they sat up to see the boys building a fire. Adam and Trent were lugging rocks up from the lakeshore and building a ring, Liam was clearing the pine needles and dried leaves away from the immediate vicinity, while Lucas hunched over a pyramid of sticks under which he’d stuffed bits of newspaper and torn-up brown paper bag. Now he was holding a match to it, breathing it into life. Other guys were bringing bigger pieces of wood and piling them near Lucas, who was, to Jenny’s delight, the apparent Fire King. Jenny wanted to tell them to be careful, but she could see that they were. She was impressed with their boy-scouts approach: the stone ring, the brush clearing. They seemed to know exactly what they were doing – which was, in Jenny’s current state of mind, nothing short of miraculous. How was it that people could just *make* fire? Just conjure it into being?

Jenny got up and went to kneel next to Lucas, who was striking match after match, lighting different pockets of the balled-up paper, coaxing the little curling flames. ‘Can I do one?’ Jenny asked, and he handed her the matchbox, smiling. She pulled a matchstick from the box and thought she’d never seen anything so pretty, so slender, a tiny magic wand. She drew it across the rough strip on the side of the box and the combustible tip roared to life. A tiny miracle between her fingertips. She could set the whole world on fire if she wanted to.

She was about to tell Lucas what she was feeling – about fire, and love, and time, and everything – when a song came on the speaker and lured her away. She merged herself into a group of girls dancing in the yard.

‘*So. Thirsty*,’ Kimber said to her as they moved and twirled, and Jenny realized that she too was parched. They went inside to get some water and found a group of people standing around the kitchen island

pouring shots of something and then lighting them on fire, yelling '*Incendio!*' – which Jenny recognized as the Harry Potter spell for fire, before blowing the flame out and downing the liquid. Jenny and Kimber approached the island and Kimber said, 'We need to drink fire.' They drank three shots of fire, which turned out to be straight rum. On their way back out the door to find Yolanda, they were waylaid by another song playing in the lounge room which commanded their limbs to shimmy and whir like live electrical cables. Liam danced up to them and they opened their mouths like fish as he dropped another ecstasy tablet onto their tongues. 'Liam! We love you!' they both sang. When they stepped outside onto the porch, the October sun had sunk beneath the tree line, into the lake, which glowed orange like a pool of lava.

'Lake Orange Juice,' Kimber said, and they laughed raucously. The bonfire had come to life, and most of the partygoers were standing in a ring around it. Lucas walked its perimeter, poking at it with a long stick, making sure it didn't spill over the rock circle they'd built. Jenny crept up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

'You made fire, Lucas,' she said proudly.

He turned around and kissed her. 'I made fire,' he repeated.

'Your pupils are so big,' she told him.

'Yours too,' he said.

They stood like that for what felt to Jenny to be a glorious eternity, enchanted with the pores in each other's skin, the flickering flames reflected in their eyes, the fact of each other's sheer existence. 'We need more wood,' a voice said, breaking their enchantment, and as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, as if she'd been planning it all along and was just waiting to be asked, as if it were the very reason they'd come to the cabin to begin with, she said, 'Be right back,' and skipped merrily to where her dad's truck was parked, unlocked. She opened the door, reached under the seat, and retrieved the volute.

Someone pulled a chair near the fire for her. Lucas held the volute while she climbed up, and then handed it back to her. She cradled it in

her hands like an infant. She peered at it, turning it, inspecting it, stroking it, sniffing it . . . trying to understand its magic, trying to see what her father saw in it. She saw nothing. Felt nothing. It was a dead weight in her hands. She looked down and saw Yolanda, Kimber, Lucas, Trent and Adam standing on either side of her, looking up at her. She saw the knowledge in their eyes; they knew – even if they didn't know exactly *what* they knew – that this was Jenny's dad's thing. The thing they'd seen him holding on the rare occasion she'd invited them to her house, resting on his lap or tucked under his arm. The thing that was often in their peripheral vision whenever Jenny's dad was present. The thing that Jenny had called 'nothing' in the truck on their way here, in a tone of voice that told them that it was very much *something*.

'Burn it, Jen,' Kimber said softly, not a command, but permission.

'Burn it,' Yolanda echoed, a little less quietly.

'Burn it!' Lucas, Adam and Trent shouted.

'Burn it! Burn it! Burn it!' the crowd of faces around the fire chanted. From her perch on the chair, it looked as if there were many more people than there had been a few hours ago when she swallowed the first pink pill with the love heart on it. There had to be at least a hundred people, she thought. She gazed toward the driveway and saw cars parked along the road as far as her eyes could see, before her view was swallowed up by the dark woods. She looked toward the cabin and saw people coming outside, going inside, milling about on the porch. Music blasted, something with a deep, heavy, thrumming bass, which she felt reverberating in her chest, rattling her rib cage.

She looked back down at the volute in her hands and a thought occurred to her. Perhaps this stupid piece of fucking wood was the reason her dad was the way he was. Maybe it was haunted like the creepy dolls she'd watched a TV show about. Maybe it was taken from an ancient burial ground and it had cursed him. Where *had* he got it? Jenny could not recall a time in her life when the volute wasn't there, commanding her dad's love and attention like a diabolical sibling. *If I burn this*, she thought, *will it free him? If I offer this sacrifice, will it heal him?* Maybe all his hate for the world, all his fear, all his paranoia and mania and anger emanated from this vile object. *Fuck it*, she thought, it was worth a try. She raised the volute over her head and the

crowd around her whooped and cheered.

'Burn it! Burn it! Burn it!' their voices clamored.

Burn it! Burn it! Burn it! her heart sang along with them.

She let out a roar, a sound she'd never made before, something animal and dangerous. She inhaled a long, deep, breath. She tasted the pine on the smoke, heard the sap crackling in the crisp air.

And then she heard her mother's voice – *W is for Whale who is Whispering*, sucking her through a rip in the fabric of time back to her childhood and into a pile of soft, warm, fresh-out-of-the-dryer laundry – yelling her name above the din.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

'Jenny!' Brynn yelled, and before the many hands that were reaching for her – Tariq's, Lisa's, Eric's – could stop her, she was running toward her daughter, holding her heavy belly.

'Jenny! Stop!' she yelled again, and this time Jenny turned her face to look down at her from where she stood on the chair. Their eyes locked. 'Jenny,' Brynn said again as the crowd parted for her and she came to stand below Jenny who was still holding Eric's piece of fucking wood over her head, frozen.

'*Mommy?*' Jenny said, her voice small and uncertain.

'Yes,' Brynn said.

Jenny slowly lowered her arms and clutched the volute to her chest. Looking at her friends, she said, 'Do you see her, too?' Five pairs of suspicious eyes looked at Brynn. They nodded, affirming her existence.

'I'm on a lot of drugs,' Jenny explained, matter-of-factly.

'That's okay, honey,' Brynn said, 'just come down from there, okay?'

Jenny swayed. 'I'm very drunk, too.'

'That's okay,' Brynn said again, still reaching up for Jenny.

'You still sound different,' Jenny said, her head tilting to one side. 'I remember when we spoke the same language.'

Brynn felt her eyes well up with tears. She was flooded with memories of the baby babble they'd spoken in the first months of Jenny's life. The raspberries and gurgles and buh-buh-buhs and the way they'd learned each other's names, the mother tongue they'd both spoken. She could still see the soft contours of Jenny's infant face – the round cheeks, the upturned nose – in the seventeen-year-old girl's face above her, glowing orange with firelight. The school photo in her wallet come to life.

‘I do, too,’ she said.

‘*Why?*’ Jenny asked then, and in that one syllable Brynn felt stitches begin to pop, seams begin to burst. She knew what Jenny was asking. She knew Jenny wanted Brynn to give her a reason for leaving that would make sense, something larger than the two of them, something meaningful and worthy of this moment they were locked in together. Something big enough, *good* enough, to have separated them for so long.

Brynn scoured herself for something to say, a reply to match the purity of Jenny’s question. But the truth was lodged in her throat and she could do no more than blink and watch as Jenny registered all of it: that there was no grand reason. Brynn had left to save herself. And she had come here, in this moment, not for Jenny – not really; she had come to save herself now, too. Brynn watched as a door which had opened inside of Jenny only moments before slammed shut.

Jenny squinted across the fire to where Eric, Charmaine, Tariq, Lisa and Porter stood. Brynn looked back toward them, too, and saw Eric take a tentative step forward, at which point Jenny raised the volute over her head once more. ‘Burn it! Burn it! Burn it!’ the teenagers around Brynn yelled. ‘Burn it! Burn it! Burn it!’

Jenny looked down at Brynn and Brynn saw, in that moment, what her absence had done to her daughter, what her leaving had wrought. ‘Mom, I have to,’ Jenny said, and Brynn nodded her head in understanding. She felt it, too: that the volute somehow represented all of this, had driven them all mad, or that it had somehow absorbed their faults and mistakes and to burn it would be a kind of cauterizing, a sealing off of an endlessly bleeding wound.

‘*Bon, alors*,’ Brynn said quietly. ‘*Vas-y.*’

Jenny threw the volute onto the flames.

And then gunshots ripped through the sky above them and dozens of teenagers flattened themselves to the earth as they’d been taught to do since they were in kindergarten.

Eric was in the fire. Porter was trying to pull him out. Sparks and embers and cinders and ash swirled around them. Eric howled as he

pulled the burning volute out of the flames. He threw it onto the ground and fell to his knees, holding his burnt hands in front of him, blisters already bubbling angrily on his palms. He began to blow on the parts of the volute that had caught fire, not understanding that he was, as usual, making things worse.

Brynn lay in a sea of bodies pressed to the ground, her arms reaching for Jenny who was still standing on the chair as another gunshot sent a bullet rocketing into the night sky. Jenny reached down for her and Brynn pulled her toward the ground, and the two of them huddled together, Brynn's hands on Jenny's precious head. And then she felt Tariq, his warm, beautiful, familiar body, drape himself over her and both of her daughters.

'Stop fucking shooting!' a voice yelled. Charmaine? Brynn peeked her head up and saw Eric's girlfriend, flanked by two burly men in military fatigues who were aiming their guns at the stars as they made their way toward the fire.

'Why the fuck did you tell us to come here then, Cheryl?!' one of the men shouted. *Cheryl*, Brynn thought abstractly, *not Charmaine*.

'To enforce law and order,' she growled, 'not to get yourselves thrown in jail.' The two men lowered their weapons and jutted their chins toward the quaking teenagers lying around the fire.

Tariq peeled himself off Brynn and Jenny, and the three of them slowly stood up and watched Cheryl and the gunmen as they took in the scene around them. Tariq angled his body to stand in front of Brynn and Jenny, an arm outstretched in front of both of them.

'You are all trespassing on private property!' Cheryl yelled. 'We have the right to make citizen's arrests! If you don't want us to arrest you, then get the fuck out now!' Unable to resist, the man to her left shot one more bullet into the sky, and a wave of teenage bodies surged toward the line of cars on the driveway, panicking and crying, shouting for their keys, yelling each other's names. Headlights flashed

on and their beams shot across the yard to where Tariq, Brynn and Jenny stood.

They watched as Cheryl and the men stormed up the stairs into the cabin. Again, Cheryl bellowed, 'This is your last chance to vacate the premises before facing the consequences! We have zip ties! We will detain you!' And another wave of kids poured out of the house and ran across the lawn to their cars.

Within minutes, a convoy of automobiles driven by terrified, intoxicated teenagers fled the scene. Cheryl and the two gunmen came back into the yard. Brynn looked around and saw that Jenny's friends – the ones who had verified Brynn's corporeal existence – remained. Eric was still kneeling in front of the volute, keening. Porter had given up on him and was standing next to Lisa, who hadn't budged from the moment they'd arrived. She seemed to Brynn to be immobile, frozen in space.

Eric stood up and looked around, searching the faces until he found Jenny's. 'How could you?' he shouted at her. 'How could you do this?'

'Don't you fucking *dare* blame her,' Brynn wanted to shout, but the words had come out of Lisa's mouth, not her own. She gazed at Lisa, who was now walking quickly toward Eric, Porter on her heels, and to everyone's astonishment, she kicked the volute like a soccer ball back into the fire. Eric moved to retrieve it again, and Lisa and Porter shifted their bodies to block his way.

Cheryl and her henchmen went to stand next to Eric, their arms crossed. Cheryl said, 'You're going to want to step aside.'

'Nope, I don't think we *do* want to step aside,' Porter said, 'do we, Lisa?'

'No, *Charmaine*, sorry, I don't think we do,' Lisa snarled. 'Are you gonna, like, kill us?'

'Way to own the libs, Nazi Barbie,' Porter added.

'Don't speak to her like that,' said Eric weakly, his eyes still searching the fire for the volute.

'Fuck your fucking *wood*, Eric,' Lisa said. 'I don't want you going anywhere near any of *them*,' she added, nodding her chin toward where Tariq, Brynn, Jenny and her friends stood clustered together.

Tariq stepped forward then, and in clear, crisp English said, 'Can

we all please calm down. We have a pregnant woman here, and these are children. Let's just, please, calm down.'

'Who the fuck is this camel jockey?' the gunman to Cheryl's right spat.

'Yeah,' said the man to her left, 'why don't you just shut the fuck up, Bin Laden, before we do it for you.'

'Dad!' Jenny yelled, surprising them all. And everyone understood what she was asking of Eric in that moment. Brynn watched it register on his face, and they all stared at him, waiting to see whether the fire had worked, whether it had burned the hate out of him.

'Eric,' Cheryl said, a warning, a dare.

Eric's face fell, and he opened his mouth to speak, but said nothing. He looked away from Jenny and stared at the ground.

'I hate you!' Jenny yelled, at nobody, at everybody, at the gods, and then she was off, running full pelt into the trees, toward the freezing lake. Moments later they heard a splash.

Brynn started to chase after her but then she felt a sudden wet warmth spread across her thighs. Looking down, she realized her waters had broken. 'No, no, no, no, no,' she said, 'not now, not now, not now,' she begged the sky as she lowered herself to the ground. She was immediately engulfed by a contraction so intense her vision swam and she broke out into a cold sweat. She needed to get to Jenny, but she was no longer in control of her body. When the contraction abated, she looked for Tariq, but she couldn't see him anywhere. Suddenly, Cheryl's face appeared in front of her, telling her to breathe. '*Fous-moi la paix!*' Brynn shouted, and then again in English, 'Get the fuck away from me!'

'I can help,' Cheryl was insisting, 'I've taken online classes.' The woman couldn't hide her excitement. 'I've got supplies in the bunker!' Brynn didn't have to tell her again. Instead, she watched as Lisa strode up alongside Cheryl and shoved her hard onto the ground. Cheryl looked absolutely mystified.

Lisa kneeled down in front of Brynn and glared at Cheryl. 'Do not fucking touch her,' she said, and then softly to Brynn, 'Are you okay? Can you hold on?' Brynn nodded.

'Jenny?' Brynn asked Lisa through her clenched teeth. Their eyes locked and Brynn saw the undeniable truth: Lisa was as much Jenny's

mother as she was. Perhaps even more.

'Tariq's gone after her,' Lisa said, squeezing her hand.

Thank God, Brynn thought, *Tariq will know what to do*.

Lisa fumbled with her phone and deflated visibly when she saw there was no service.

'If you stand over here, you can get two bars,' Eric said sheepishly, and Cheryl glared at him.

They all listened as Porter called 911, calmly explaining that there were men with guns, a woman in labour, a man with severe burns, and a teenage girl in the water. When he hung up, he said solemnly, 'Thirty minutes, minimum. We're in the fucking sticks.'

Cheryl and the gunmen decided not to wait for the cops, and drove off in the bright orange Hummer the two men had arrived in.

'Jenny! Tariq!' Brynn yelled, and tried to stand up as another contraction barreled through her.

'Shhh,' Lisa cooed, 'just try to breathe,' but Brynn saw the panic in her eyes as they darted between her and the lake where Jenny and Tariq had run to.

'Jenny!' Eric finally screamed, as if he'd just awoken in that moment to what was actually taking place around him. That while his wood burned in the fire, his daughter was in the freezing water. He bolted in the direction of the lake. 'Jenny!' he shouted again, but then he stopped abruptly when Tariq, holding Jenny in his arms, emerged from the trees, breathing hard, freezing water trickling down their faces and dripping from their bodies.

'She's not breathing,' Tariq said raggedly as Brynn was swallowed by another contraction.

'Jenny,' she screamed, her fingers digging into the dirt. 'Jenny!' she cried as she watched her husband lay Jenny gently on the ground and begin chest compressions. And in that moment, through her pain, she knew it had arrived. Her punishment. The dread that had been stalking her for twelve years. *V is for Viper.* She would bring one daughter into the world as she watched another one leave. And she would not, she knew, survive it.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

For the third time in her life, Lisa sat by Brynn's hospital bed. The first – to cast her eyes on a newly born Jenny; the second – when they thought Brynn might never return to them; and now – as Brynn held a sleeping Sabine against her chest. Over the last three days, Lisa had become very well acquainted with three different floors at Elderpool General Hospital: the Maternity Ward, the Burns Unit, and the Intensive Care Unit.

She had already visited Jenny in the ICU that morning. She had been awake and eating red jello when Lisa poked her head around the door and said, 'Knock knock.' Jenny smiled and said, 'Come in.' She was still on oxygen, and two tubes were clipped below her nostrils, but she was off the ventilator.

Tariq had performed CPR and they'd all watched in horror and relief as Jenny coughed up a lungful of water. When a caravan of police cars and ambulances had arrived at the cabin, Jenny was breathing shallowly, but unconscious. Her lips had gone a deathly blue. The combination of the ecstasy, the alcohol and her panic had caused her heart to fail in the frigid lake, and like her mother twelve years prior, she had lost consciousness and fallen into a hypothermic oblivion. Sabine crowned as Jenny was loaded into the ambulance and the terror in Brynn's screams had taken Lisa's breath away, and evaporated any remaining anger Lisa felt toward her.

Jenny was lucky, the doctors said – she could have died. But instead, she surfaced sooner than anyone anticipated, anxious to hear about her parents. This morning, Lisa had explained to her that Sabine was out of the NICU and doing well, and that Brynn and Sabine would be discharged in a few days. Eric's hands were still a worry, covered as they were in third-degree burns, but the main concern was infection at this stage. He was slated to stay in hospital until he could use his

hands to feed and care for himself. At the moment they were two useless mitts of gauze and bandages.

Lisa conveyed this information in a soft voice, but she did not tell Jenny about the cuffs around her father's ankles, or about the fact that when he was discharged from the hospital, he'd be going to jail. *Not yet*, she thought, *not until she's stronger*. But she hadn't anticipated that Jenny would have seen the news on the television mounted to the wall opposite her bed.

'I know what's going on,' Jenny said.

'Oh,' Lisa said, 'okay. Well, do you want me to find out if you can talk to him?'

'No,' Jenny said, firmly. And Lisa was grateful, because she hadn't spoken to Eric yet, either. She just couldn't. Not after all the things that had come to light at the cabin. She was ashamed that she hadn't known just how far down the rabbit hole he'd gone, how dark and dangerous his ideas were and how prepared he'd been to realize them. She had nothing to say to him. Every day, out of a sense of duty and on Jenny's behalf, she asked the nurses on the Burns Unit about his progress, but that was all she could do. She had, however, handed one of the policemen stationed outside his room the manila envelope that Porter had given her. 'Please give this to Eric's lawyer,' she asked, and couldn't stop herself from smiling.

'So, my mom, the baby, they'll be leaving soon?' Jenny asked her, pressing the button on the side of her bed so she could sit up straighter.

'I think that's the plan, yes, as soon as they can fly.' As Lisa watched Jenny's face, she saw all the ages of her flutter across her features like a book flung open by the wind, pages turning and turning and turning. She loved her so much.

'Your grandparents –' Lisa began gently.

'I want to go home with you,' Jenny said urgently, as if she worried Lisa might say no.

'Okay, honey,' Lisa said, and squeezed her hand, trying and failing not to tear up with relief. With those seven words – *I want to go home with you* – the last twelve years of Lisa's life didn't seem like such a waste after all.

And now she was sitting next to Brynn's bed, watching her watch Sabine sleep. Tariq had taken the opportunity of Lisa's visit to go back to the hotel for a shower, and to arrange Sabine's birth certificate and passport. He was eager to get them out of America as fast as he could. 'I'm sorry, Lisa, I don't mean to be rude,' he'd said as they'd sipped terrible coffee together in the hallway outside Brynn's room, 'but all the rumors about your country are true.' Lisa couldn't blame him. Within hours of his arrival, he'd been the victim of hate speech and witnessed multiple weapons-based crimes. She liked Tariq. He had saved Jenny's life, for which they were all grateful, but he also had kind eyes, a gentle voice, and the most beautiful hands she'd ever seen on a man. But she observed these qualities from a different vantage point than when she used to take stock of Eric. She was happy for Brynn, and happy for Sabine, that they were joined to such a selfless, tender soul. She knew he would be a good dad.

This was the first time they'd been left on their own, she and Brynn. And Lisa found she wasn't sure what to say. So she was grateful when Brynn spoke up in her accented English.

'I didn't expect you to hug me like that, when I arrived at the house.'

'Believe me, it surprised me, too,' Lisa said.

'I was happy you did,' Brynn said. 'It's funny, because to be honest, I didn't think I missed you. I'm sorry if that sounds mean. But I didn't think I did, until you were hugging me, and then I realized that I've been missing you for a long time.'

'Well, if it's any consolation, if you'd turned up a week earlier, I probably would have slammed the door in your face. You came at a, shall we say, *interesting* moment for me. I just didn't have it in me to be mad at you anymore.'

'Thank you,' Brynn said.

'Oh, you don't have to thank me, honestly, I did miss you someti–'

'No, no,' Brynn interrupted, and Lisa saw that Brynn's eyes were filling with tears. 'I mean, *thank you*, Lisa, for raising Jenny.' Lisa began to cry too, and reached for the box of tissues on the table next to Brynn. She pulled one out and handed it to Brynn, and pulled another out for herself. They both dabbed at their eyes and looked at each other. She could still see eight-year-old Brynn in the forty-year-old

woman in front of her. Lisa thought of the first day of third grade when they'd crashed their bikes into each other. She remembered all the nights Brynn had slept over at her place and they'd stayed up way too late, talking about everything, talking about nothing. For years there had been no secrets between them. She remembered when she'd been singing karaoke – what was the song? – at a Halloween party dressed like a sexy zombie, and it had gone so wrong. She had massively miscalculated both her level of courage and her singing abilities and had found herself standing on the coffee table alone, messing up the words, hoping a black hole would appear and swallow her up. And then there was Brynn, singing with her, saving her, making it all okay. She thought about *The Song*, and how it had sucked the life out of her brave, beautiful friend, and how she'd stuck by her, shoulder to shoulder. And then she thought about how she'd used that song against Brynn all those years later; she'd gotten so jealous, so mad, and she'd wanted to hurt her. But then it struck her how very young they'd been when everything fell apart, when Brynn left and Lisa moved in to fill the space she'd vacated. Twenty-eight. Still kids, really. What did any of them know? They'd all been kind of winging it. And she couldn't find it in her to be mad at Brynn anymore. When she'd seen Brynn standing at the front door, forty and pregnant, terrified for Jenny, all she remembered was the love.

Finally, Brynn asked, 'And what about Eric. Will you . . . stay with him?'

Lisa smiled at Brynn then and said, in her best French accent, 'Aireek? Eef you want 'eem, you can 'ave 'eem!' And they both burst out laughing. 'Um, no,' Lisa said, gathering herself. 'Eric isn't who I thought he was. And I think he's in a lot of trouble. But,' Lisa paused, 'I *will* stay with Jenny.'

Brynn cocked her head and looked at Lisa as she kissed the top of Sabine's sleeping head. 'She's very lucky to have you, Lisa.'

They sat in silence for a few minutes, watching Sabine simply be.

'*Je t'aime*, Chloe,' Brynn finally said.

'*Je t'aime*, Sophie,' Lisa said.

That night, back at the Matador Street house, she gazed out the window into the backyard at the sugar maple tree and realized she'd had it all wrong. Brynn had never been the maple tree. Nor was she root rot, like Lisa had once believed. She was not a cactus in the snow, misplanted. No – Brynn's condition was that she was rootless. Brynn, Lisa realized, was moss. She clung lightly, and she could not be clung to.

When Lisa thought about all she knew of Brynn's life, it made sense to her. She'd never had roots. She supposed at one point Brynn had tried to plant them with Lisa's own family, all those years ago. But they hadn't taken.

Lisa wished she'd realized this earlier, even as she forgave herself for the years of anger. You cannot be mad at moss for not being a tree. She smiled to herself, then, and for the rest of her life she would smile every time she saw moss, which she associated with Brynn – her first and oldest friend – who had given her a home, a garden, and a daughter.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Jenny made it to Paris just in time for Sabine's fifth birthday. Assia's wife, Birgitta, picked her up in a tiny lime-green Peugeot which barely fit the two of them, let alone Jenny's suitcases. 'You need to learn to travel lighter,' Birgitta said in English as the two of them shoved the suitcases into what passed as a back seat, and then she turned to Jenny and gave her a long hug, until other cars waiting in the airport arrivals queue started to honk and shout at them. 'It's good to see you again,' Birgitta said, running around to the driver's side and waving her hands at the angry cars behind them. 'Let's go, everyone's waiting.'

Walking into Tariq's flat, Jenny heard music and smelled the rich aromas of Noor's cooking. She had promised to make Jenny her favorite tagine, with extra apricots.

'We're here!' Birgitta announced, '*Nous sommes ici!*' and Sabine came barreling down the corridor and launched herself into Jenny's arms. Lola was close behind, and jumped up to lick Jenny's face.

'*Tu m'as apporté des cadeaux?*' Sabine asked as Jenny nuzzled her nose into Sabine's neck.

'Don't I bring you presents every year?' Jenny said in French, and Tariq and Assia, who had come quietly into the foyer, both said 'Brava!' before giving her a kiss on both cheeks.

'Don't *brava* me yet,' Jenny said in English, 'I'm still learning.'

Jenny had been visiting Sabine for her birthday every year for the past five years. And, for the last four years, she'd been taking French as one of her electives at UCLA. She'd already graduated with a degree in Anthropology, but was staying on to get her Masters in Linguistics. Her area of interest was in chimpanzee communication and the development of language in early hominids. She was acutely interested in the time *before* language as we've come to know it. Before words came along and made everything infinitely better, more

beautiful, more meaningful – and fucked everything up. When, if we wanted to stay safe inside the group, secure our place around the fire, we had to *show* what we were made of, not tell. Her thesis advisor seemed to think she was onto something.

The first year she'd visited Tariq and Sabine had been a last-minute decision on Jenny's part, but something Tariq had been asking her to do for months. He'd even booked her a flight, and told her it was there if she wanted it, no pressure, but Sabine would love it, and so would he. They hadn't heard from Brynn, he'd said, but Jenny was always welcome.

Five years ago, Tariq had been the one to call her. It was two weeks after Jenny had been discharged from the hospital. Two weeks after she'd walked past the open door of Brynn's own hospital room, where she was sitting up on the edge of the bed, struggling to breastfeed a squealing Sabine, a nurse on either side of her trying to assist. Two weeks after Brynn had glanced up and caught Jenny's eye, smiled through the pain and beckoned for Jenny to enter the room with a subtle tilt of her head. *Come and meet your sister*, it said, *come and be with us*. Jenny had taken a step forward, stopped, opened her mouth to say something, closed it, and then walked away.

Her memories from the night of the bonfire, the night her mother had materialized out of thin air, were like a bowl that had been smashed into hundreds of fragments. Every day she found another piece, and she was carefully trying to glue them back together. She supposed she had about half of the bowl repaired now, but there were still pieces missing – which made her feel useless, after all a bowl isn't a bowl if it can't hold anything. What she did remember, more vividly than she'd like to, was the moment she saw straight into her mother's heart, to the raw truth of her. All these years Jenny had been thinking that everyone was lying to her – that there was no way that she had simply chosen herself above everyone else, above Jenny.

But she had. She had.

Jenny was surprised that the realization didn't make her angrier.

She had already begun to see the ways in which the world tried to make women small. She'd seen the ways that Lisa had bent and twisted herself trying to be what her dad wanted, trying to fit into the role of wife and mother – two names they'd never given her. And Jenny knew what her dad wanted for his daughter, too – that she stay in Elderpool, marry and have children, find her way to the church, and want for no more than that. Her mother had seen an open window and jumped, and now, Jenny almost admired her for it.

Almost. Because a few days later, Tariq explained when he called, the three of them had boarded their flight to Paris. They were seated in first class, and Tariq was holding Sabine while Brynn stood up to stretch her legs in the aisle next to him. *I think she needs a change*, Tariq told Brynn, and Brynn reached down and picked up Sabine. 'I was looking for the diaper bag when it happened,' Tariq recounted to Jenny over the phone. 'Suddenly there was the most intense turbulence. It was like we had dropped thousands of feet in an instant. It was terrifying. I was sure in that moment that we would all die. I had my seatbelt on, but Brynn had been standing up with Sabine. Later another passenger told me that Brynn had actually hit the ceiling! *Le plafond!* And then she hit her head on a drinks cart that had come loose on her way down. There was so much blood, coming out of a wound somewhere in her hair; it was running down her face. Sorry, is this too much detail?'

'No,' Jenny said. She had put him on speakerphone and brought the phone in to where Lisa was reading on the couch. 'Tell us everything. Lisa's here.'

'Hi, Lisa,' Tariq said.

'Hi, Tariq,' Lisa said, confused, taking her glasses off and setting her book – *The Subtle Art of Not Giving A F*ck*, a gift from Porter – aside. 'Is everything okay?'

'No, not at all,' he said matter-of-factly. 'As I was saying, Brynn was bleeding from her head. Other people had gotten badly hurt, too. But she had managed to protect Sabine the whole time, even when she fell – she fell *over* Sabine, on top of her like a dome. A dome? Is that the word?'

'A dome, yes,' Jenny and Lisa answered together. His words illuminated another fragment from the broken bowl of Jenny's

memory. She recalled how, when the men had fired their guns, Tariq had draped himself over her mother and her, pressing them against each other, pressing her against Sabine and for a moment their three bodies had been one. Jenny glued the fragment of that memory to the rest of the bowl, and continued listening to Tariq.

'It was really extraordinary, that instinct. But she was badly hurt, as I say, bleeding everywhere, and the look in her eyes was pure terror. "You're okay," I told her, in French, of course, but when she opened her mouth to speak, she was saying, "*Hilf mir, rette Sabine! Hilf mir, rette Sabine!*" over and over. The only word I understood was *Sabine*. I was shouting that I couldn't understand her, asking for someone to help us, when one of the other passengers put his hand on my shoulder and said, "It's German, she's saying *help me, save Sabine*, in German."' He paused for so long that Jenny and Lisa thought the call had dropped out.

'Tariq?' Jenny asked.

'Yes, sorry, I'm here. I just . . .'

'It's okay, tell us, is she alright?' Lisa asked.

'Well, she's gone.'

Tariq explained that Brynn had been taken to the hospital as soon as they landed in Paris and treated for a minor concussion; she'd needed two tiny stitches in her head. There had been no coma, no surgery, no news story. It had been, as the doctor explained, a serious knock on the head, but nothing very severe. And then he'd asked Tariq what part of Germany Brynn hailed from.

Tariq brought Brynn and Sabine home, and helped Brynn to bed. Get some sleep, he'd told her. *Danke schön*, she'd said. He hoped by morning the German would have worn off. It hadn't. As she had once struggled to find her English, she now struggled to find her French.

For two days they'd tried to make it work, praying that the German would recede and her French would come back. 'I'm embarrassed to admit this,' Tariq told them, 'but I even thought about hitting her on the head with something, you know, to see if that would work?'

'I understand,' Lisa said. 'I thought about that, too, the first time.'

But Brynn took matters into her own hands; she'd seen this movie before. She wasn't going to wait until she'd ground everyone around her, including herself, down to a nub. 'She told me she was going to

get help,' Tariq said. 'She said she thinks she can heal herself, she just needs to be in Germany to do it. She said she'll come back soon.'

Jenny and Lisa looked at each other.

'So, now I'm –' Tariq began, but was interrupted by a wailing Sabine. 'Sorry, Jenny, I have to go. I'll call you back,' he said, and he hung up.

Jenny didn't know why Tariq needed to call her back. Hadn't he just told her everything? Brynn had knocked her head into another language, another way of seeing the world, *again*. Again, she'd left her husband and child behind. Jenny didn't need – or want – to know anything more.

But when Tariq called her back the next day, she couldn't bring herself to decline his call. He had saved her life, after all. She barely remembered running to the lake, diving into the freezing water. She'd only wanted to get away from them all. She'd wanted to wake up from the fever dream she'd found herself in. She couldn't tell what was real and what was the drugs, the alcohol, the shock of seeing her mother. She'd thought the cold would help. And when she'd made her way to the water and had seen the orange buoy bobbing in the middle of the lake she decided to swim to it. And so she jumped in. But as she swam toward the buoy it only seemed to move farther away from her. She knew she should swim back to the shore then, but the cold had taken hold of her, and she'd gotten so disoriented, and it had made perfect sense to her then to just take a little break, just a quick one, just to gather her thoughts, and so she let herself go under. And that's all she remembered until she woke up in the back of an ambulance, and her first thought had been of Lisa, that she badly needed, badly wanted, Lisa.

So, out of a sense of debt and duty, she answered Tariq's call – it was the least she could do. But Tariq didn't talk about Brynn. Rather, he talked about Sabine, told Jenny about Sabine's magic bedroom, and about his own father, and what kind of father he himself was going to be. They talked until Sabine's cries called him away.

He called Jenny often after that, switching to video chats so that he could wave Sabine's little hand at her, and Jenny could gaze at the little being on the screen, trying to work out what they were to each other.

As Sabine's first birthday neared, Tariq floated the idea of Jenny coming to Paris. At first, Jenny balked. But Tariq was slyly persistent, using Sabine's adorable chubby cheeks and gurgling coos as bait. It was Lisa, though, who tipped the scale when she said, 'Go, Jenny. Sabine's birthday is your re-birthday, if you think about it.' And she was right. Sabine had been born on the same day as Jenny had, in a way, died. She'd had no heartbeat. And then there was Tariq, his hands pressing into her chest, his mouth breathing oxygen into her lungs, bringing her back. In this way, he'd given both Jenny and Sabine life. And it was in this way that Jenny finally understood Sabine as her sister. It had nothing at all to do with Brynn.

'I'm so happy you're going,' Lisa had told her when Jenny announced that she had decided to take Tariq up on his offer. 'Sabine is your family.'

'You're my family,' Jenny told her, but she knew what Lisa meant. Sabine was the only other person with whom she shared blood, some genetic link, who she cared to know.

Her dad had written to her numerous times, but the envelopes from the Ionia Correctional Facility where he was serving twelve years went into her drawer unopened. He had pleaded guilty to multiple charges, including ownership of an illegal bunker which had not been built according to safety codes and standards, child endangerment, unregistered firearms, possession of illegal silencers, the modification of semi-automatic rifles into fully automatic rifles, and intention to incite violence. Cheryl and her gun-shooting sidekicks had also been sent to prison, and when police raided their Elderpool apartments, they found rooms full of Nazi memorabilia and Confederate flags, along with stockpiles of weapons and enough military fatigues to outfit a small army.

Lisa had asked Jenny if she wanted to be present for her dad's sentencing, offering to go with her if she did. But Jenny didn't want to. She didn't want to see him. She could guess at the contents of his letters. She didn't need to read them to know that they were full of apologies, of attempts to explain himself, of promises to do better, of efforts to reform his hateful heart, and pleas for her to visit, but she didn't want to hear any of it. She preserved a small place in her heart that might be ready to talk to him again someday – and she got no

pleasure from imagining him in prison – but she was far from ready.

So instead, Jenny and Lisa settled into a new, quiet routine, and Jenny focused on getting to the end of her final year of high school. Jenny didn't know the details, but Lisa had explained to her that the house was theirs, and not to worry, Porter and his wife Catriona had taken care of it.

Jenny had been nervous to go back to school after the events that had transpired. But when she showed up one Wednesday morning, shoulders rolled forward, hiding her face behind her hair, Lucas had come running toward her and lifted her into his arms. And then Kimber, Yolanda, Adam and Trent were there, too, lifting her off the ground, hugging her. As they walked down the hall toward her locker, applause erupted and voices began chanting, 'Jenny's dad's cabin! Jenny's dad's cabin!' The story of the four-day party had metastasized into something mythic, going down in the annals of Elderpool High's history as the most legendary party ever thrown. It had gotten a little out of control, the retelling, and one version of the story had Jenny standing *in* the flames, holding a magical piece of wood over her head, but the flames couldn't harm her, instead they lapped at her benignly like so many dogs' tongues. In these stories she was like a rogue saint, anointed by her peers. So her dad had given her that, at least.

When Jenny got her letter of acceptance into UCLA, Lisa cried and opened a bottle of very expensive champagne. When Jenny told Lucas, he received the information gently, and they both agreed it was time to let each other go. Tariq sent her flowers with a little note attached that read, *From Uncle Tariq and Sister Sabine.* So he wanted to be her uncle, did he? Jenny pondered it. It made sense. She felt he deserved a family title. She didn't see him as a father, or a brother, or even as a friend in the way that she understood the word. Uncle seemed appropriate. So after that, he was Uncle Tariq.

It was a two-for-one deal, apparently, because she'd also recently inherited another uncle, Uncle Porter. He'd stayed with them until he was sure that Lisa and Jenny had found their footing, until the color had come back into Jenny's cheeks, and until both Lisa and Jenny were securely established as the owners of 702 Matador Street. She adored Porter, ever since they'd bonded one night over their shared love of Will Ferrell and had a heated debate about which was better,

Step Brothers or *Talladega Nights*.

'I'm Brennen, but you have to call me Nighthawk,' Jenny quoted.

'Ricky Bobby!' Porter countered, incredulous.

But what she really loved was what he brought out in Lisa. She'd become so much lighter, so much easier, and so much funnier since Porter had come and Jenny's dad had gone.

And now, Uncle Tariq was taking Jenny's suitcases to the guest room while Sabine jumped up and down in front of her, asking for her presents, taking her by the hand and leading her deeper into the heart of the warm house.

Later that night, when the jet lag wouldn't let her sleep, Jenny thought about the paper she'd written five years earlier. She still didn't know what the Spirit of Our Times was, and over the years she'd revised her answer numerous times in her imagination. For her college essay, she'd decided to write about polarization and ideological extremism and how divided people were by their algorithms, and that she worried there was no way they'd solve the problems of the world if they carried on down this path. It had been good enough for the admissions officer at UCLA, but tonight, with her little sister and her uncle Tariq asleep in their rooms, Lisa back in Michigan tending the home that Jenny would always be able to go back to, she knew that it had been absurd to ask a teenage girl to guess at such a question, which had been the wrong question all along. Where once she'd found it elusive and vague, now she understood that the question itself could not contain the paradoxes that she'd begun to see everywhere, in everyone, in herself.

Jenny had come to believe that the only way forward was to learn to inhabit the space between good and bad, right and wrong, and to make peace with contradiction. Love wasn't what she'd thought it was. It wasn't a solid, unchanging thing you could rely on.

Love wasn't a promise.

Love could end.

Or at least, it could grow weary and weak. Perhaps, in this sense, love ages, becomes tired, its brittle bones unable to carry the load it once had. The two people who had, at one point, loved her most in the world hadn't been able to sustain it, to sustain her. She had learned that love exists side by side with disappointment, with grief, with

betrayal. She felt this truth – which had become less and less painful over time – whenever she thought of the Dogwood cabin, when she tried to harmonise the incongruity of her memories. Because the cabin was the site of both her best and worst days, where she had felt dizzyingly free but also cornered and caught, where she'd been given so much and had so much taken away. She tried not to think about it yet hoped she'd never forget it. It was only when she stopped trying to reconcile the paradox that she felt herself heal, and a new kind of freedom presented itself to her, a freedom she suspected was there for everyone, once they understood it. It was the freedom to cobble together your own family, to choose who you belonged to. To love the dad yet despise the man. To conjure benevolent uncles out of the air. To catch baby sisters falling out of the sky. To notice the mothers who had been across the hall for years.

Epilogue

Torschlusspanik

Brynn has come to know a thing or two about time. Because Brynn has seen it slow down. She's seen it contract and expand. She's seen it stop. The turbulence had come out of nowhere. She'd been standing in the aisle of the plane, holding Sabine and looking down at Tariq, and then she was in the air, her head hitting the ceiling . . .

. . . and time stopped. And, just like last time, she experienced the compression of thousands of thoughts and perceptions into a single moment, every possible angel dancing on the head of a pin . . .

. . . there she was again in the Field of Now . . . *Retrouvailles* – it was good to be back.

She thought of her mother's cardboard box of dead dreams rotting in the basement . . .

. . . she thought of Freya Thomas, saving the world, dripping in turquoise . . .

. . . she thought about Madame O'Flanagan . . .

. . . she thought about Joni Mitchell singing 'Little Green' . . .

And then she was on the ground, her head bleeding, her body a shield over Sabine. Sabine! And Brynn had cried, '*Hilf mir, rette Sabine! Hilf mir, rette Sabine!*' – because she needed Sabine to be okay. And once she sensed that Sabine *was* okay, Brynn was flooded with *Torschlusspanik* – an urgency to slide through the door before it shut forever, before it was too late.

Fight or flight? She knew these were her only options, again. *Kampf oder Flucht?*

Acutely, she sensed her *Fernweh* – a piercing longing to be elsewhere, because elsewhere was where she'd always understood herself best. Once again, everything changed in an *Augenblick* – and that couldn't possibly be her fault. She had not summoned the turbulence any more than she'd conjured the ice! The fact that this had happened to her twice was such an unbelievable, *seltsamer Zufall* – the strangest coincidence – that it could only be a message, a warning. The Field of Now was trying to tell her something *again*. There was no use trying to explain this to Tariq – in his eyes, she knew that anything she might say would come across as *Erklärungsnot* – an impoverished explanation.

Kampf oder Flucht?

But even if she did try explaining it, what good would it do? Nothing she could say – and no way that she could say it – would be satisfying. It wasn't her fault that to be human was to have *Weltschmerz* – a weariness about all the pain and suffering in the world. That didn't mean that she wasn't dealing with some *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – that she didn't feel shame about the events of her past, that she didn't know that she had scorched the earth behind her in the wake of her leaving, her *leavings*.

Kampf oder Flucht?

Brynn entschied sich für die Flucht.

'*Jetzt haben wir den Salat*,' Jillian said when Brynn called from Berlin to say, *Ich bleibe* – I'm staying. Brynn had laughed – somehow, she knew the phrase. It had been uploaded into her brain when she'd knocked it against the roof of the plane. *Now we have the salad*, it meant literally. *Now everything is a mess*, it meant figuratively. But, salad or no salad, Jillian had come to visit her. She was still her best friend, she'd told her, and then she'd switched to agent mode, and continued to find her work.

Jillian kept in touch with Tariq, and she informed Brynn that Jenny had recently visited Paris for Sabine's first birthday. She told her that by all accounts, the two sisters were enchanted with one another.

Jillian had been worried the news would upset Brynn, but Brynn felt herself swell with pride. She felt the tentacles of Jenny's love and Sabine's need release her heart, and imagined them entwined with each other instead. Freed, her own heart could beat more strongly, her lungs could take in more air. She had the deep sense that she had fulfilled her end of some mysterious, cosmic bargain. She had grown these two girls inside her body, she had brought them into the world, healthy and whole, and given them the greatest gift she could: each other. She'd paid for her second – and third – soul.

As for Tariq, she missed him. But she missed him in the way you miss something unrecoverable; your youth or a favorite sweater you left on a train. She wondered if there was an Arabic word for this particular shade of love. (If she'd still been with Tariq, he would have told her about *jawaa* – a kind of love-grief, love's shadow side – or *tabl* – a kind of love that destroys you, that you must escape before it drives you mad. But she'd never learn these words from him, or anyone.) She hoped that Sabine and Jenny would soothe the ache she knew she'd left inside of him.

She had thought about contacting Dr. Reyes. They'd lost contact when she moved to France all those years ago, and she could imagine the open astonishment on his kind face as she brought him up to date. His salt-and-pepper beard was probably all salt now. But she found that even imagining the conversation exhausted her, and she didn't feel like being studied this time.

In her second year in Germany, Brynn went to Bavaria for a *Vogue Deutschland* photo shoot on the banks of the Königssee, the clearest lake she'd ever seen, pocketed away in the Berchtesgaden Alps. When they arrived, they were greeted by Felix, a minder assigned by the local council to ensure their photo shoot left no environmental footprint. He was a lovely man, Brynn thought, admiring his nicely trimmed beard and the way he smiled while he spoke. He told them that the mountains where they stood were around sixty-five million years old, that they had emerged and risen out of the earth's crust during the Mesozoic era. He asked them to close their eyes and imagine the upheaval, how the granite and limestone moved across the landscape, carving it, changing it, creating the lake they were there to photograph. He explained to them that the birth of mountain ranges

altered wind and rain patterns, changed the ecosystem, attracted or repelled different wildlife. 'The cataclysm of tectonic plates,' he said, smiling, 'smashing into one and other, wreaking havoc, is necessary to create the majesty you see around you.'

'*Ich liebe das*,' Brynn said. I love that.

'*Ich auch*,' Felix said to Brynn, beaming at her. So do I.

'Where are you from?' he asked her, catching something in her accent. She pretended not to hear him.

On her day off, she spent a long, slow morning peering closely at small things: the impossibly tiny pencil shavings of lichen on the boulder where she lay; the entire sun reflected in a single drop of water drying on her arm after a swim; the grooves of her own fingerprint. Sixty-five million years. Unfathomable time. She'd be carbon dust before she knew it. Nothing that she did really mattered all that much. The thought was soothing, calming, and she'd felt – perhaps for the first time in her life – *Geborgenheit* . . .

. . . It's untranslatable.

Fin.

Acknowledgments

Firstly, I want to acknowledge all the women in my life who have trusted me with their mothering stories – the contradictory emotions, the identity shifts and tugs of war, the bare bones of a bad day, and the blinding light of the good ones – all of you have helped me bring Brynn and Lisa to life.

And I also want to thank the many women in my life who, for various reasons, don't have children and have similarly trusted me with their stories – the other ways in which they have mothered, the new roles they have hewn for themselves, the liberation that sits alongside grief, the hard choices that sit alongside joy.

I have been writing this book for a long time, and the words in these pages have changed along with the world. And while there are – I hope – many overlapping layers of themes and theses, it has always, for me, been primarily about the power of language.

Madame O'Flanagan is based on my French teacher, Maj-Britt Eagle, from Monterey High School, who was also my English & Literature teacher. It was in her classroom that I became a writer, and under her tutelage that Charlemagne's words – which Dr. Reyes relays to Brynn – that 'to possess a second language is to possess a second soul,' became a core and activating belief. Still, my French is rusty (sorry, Madame Eagle), and all thanks to Robin Benyahia for his corrections and colloquialisms.

I have been blessed with many language teachers since. Thank you to the many Arabic teachers I have had – the first one being an Imam in a mosque in Jacksonville, Florida, to the scholars I was lucky to learn from at the University of Chicago, to the teachers who I whiled away many afternoons with in the Old City of Sana'a, Yemen.

I am equally grateful to all the Spanish speakers I was lucky enough to grow up with, work alongside, hear on the radio and on

television – so that I, like most Californians, had a passing ability to speak *Spanglish*. If I fell and hit my head only to wake up in a similar state as Brynn, I wouldn't be surprised if it was Spanish, which suffused the Californian air I was raised on, that my brain latched on to.

I never did study German and am lucky enough to share a fence with the most glorious neighbor, Samitha Kutschera, who hails from the Black Forest of the Brothers Grimm for her help with the German elements of this novel.

To the early readers: my sister Genevieve, and my soul-sistas Nicola Harvey and Melissa Doyle – your feedback, observations and encouragement are all over these pages.

Back to the topic of mothers . . . this book has many: Pippa Masson (more visionary than agent), Cate Blake, Danielle Walker, Brianne Collins and Ingrid Ohlsson (more conjuring sorceresses than publishers and editors) and Candi Wyman (more fearless guide than publicist). Thank you to Rufus Cuthbert and the entire team at Pan Macmillan Australia.

I want to mention and recommend Claire Dederer's phenomenal work, *Monsters*, which landed in my hands at the perfect time, specifically for her segment on Joni Mitchell entitled 'Abandoning Mothers' which crystallized so much for me, and inspired the conversation that Jillian and Brynn have at the cafe over breakfast.

My dad Mark, my stepmother Maureen, my sister and I pop up now and again in this book, little cameos and fragments that only we would recognize. I love our interconnected story – even the hard bits. Especially the hard bits.

Writing is my most profound joy and my most natural state – but that doesn't mean it doesn't make me weird and self-possessed, cranky and sore, headachy and nervous, hangry and exhausted . . . so to Edward, my husband, who takes it all in stride and knows when to offer encouragement, love, a hug or a coffee: I love you.

Finally to my own mom, Marjorie, who is never out of reach and would never dream of being a Brynn. AMLF.

About the author

Naima Brown was born and raised in Northern California and now resides in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales with her husband and her dog. She holds degrees in Middle Eastern Studies, Anthropology and Religious Studies. As a producer of news, current affairs and documentary, she has lived and worked in Yemen and Afghanistan. Her brief stint in reality TV inspired her first novel, *The Shot*. *Mother Tongue* is her second novel.

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First published 2025 in Macmillan by Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Limited
1 Market Street, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, 2000

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Cataloguing-in-Publication entry is available from the National Library of Australia
http://catalogue.nla.gov.au

EPUB format: 9781761685019

Internal illustrations by Adobe Stock and Shutterstock
Typeset by Midland Typesetters, Australia
Cover design by Alissa Dinallo
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